

THE DOUGLAS ROMANCE

DOUGLAS SLADEN





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The Douglas Romance

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DEDICATED TO

The Right Honble. SIR HERBERT MAXWELL,

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Lord Lieutenant of Wigtownshire, etc., etc..

THE HISTORIAN OF THE HOUSE OF DOUGLAS.

To the study of whose works I owe the conception
of this book, and to whose help I owe its completion.

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FOREWORD

TO THE READER

You must understand that the twenty-fifth Earl of Douglas who figures in this tale is the lineal descendant of the Good Sir James Douglas—the famous Black Douglas, who forms, with Robert the Bruce and Sir William Wallace, the great triumvirate of Scotland's national heroes.

You must understand that he traces his descent through James, son of Archibald, Earl of Moray (died 1455), and nephew of James, ninth Earl of Douglas (died 1488), with whom the senior line of Douglas was long supposed to have come to an end, since nothing less than the stamping-out of the great House, to whom Scotland owed her independence of England, would satisfy the jealousy of the Stuart Kings. Twice already had these Royal Jameses, by the assassination of William, the sixth Earl, and his brother David, in 1440, and William, the eighth Earl, in 1452, endeavoured to secure the extinction of the Black Douglas.

This boy was secreted away, therefore, and lost to sight, his inheritance being mostly handed over to the Red Douglas. If the Red Douglas had stood by his Chief instead of by his King, there is small doubt that The Douglas would have secured the Throne of Scotland, out of the melting-pot into which his nation, like other nations, was thrown at the end of the Middle Ages.

And if the virile House of Douglas had been established on the Scottish Throne, Scotland might have been an independent kingdom yet—a debt from our Empire to the Stuarts which has never been properly acknowledged.

FOREWORD

You must understand that the boy son of that Douglas Earl of Moray, when restored to the Earldom of Douglas by James V., made no claim to the Earldom of Moray, which James had bestowed on his illegitimate son, receiving in return the privilege of his Douglas Earldom being granted to heirs general, and therefore transmissible by a daughter, if sons failed—which did not once happen in the four centuries between the restoration of the tenth Earl and the succession of the twenty-fifth.

And you can readily understand, from the fact of fifteen Earls going to these four centuries, that there was an unusual number of minorities among the holders of the title, and that, these minorities coinciding with the periods of great wars, the later Earls of Douglas lost their place in history, like the later Howards of Norfolk, from the days of James I. until their revival in the days of Queen Victoria.

But in the Middle Ages the Black Douglas and the first four Earls led the hosts of Scotland in their death-grapple with the English, from the days of the Bruce to the days of Harry Hotspur.

When the Scottish Kings broke the power of the Black Douglas, they broke the power of Scotland with it. From that time forth the great battles all went against the Scots. There was no Black Douglas at Flodden or Solway or Musselburgh. There was no Black Douglas at Dunbar ; there was no Black Douglas of the fighting age for the Jacobite invasions of the '15 and the '45 to lose his head or his title or his lands for the Stuarts, who had been so ungrateful to his House.

You can therefore understand that the twenty-fifth Earl, who, like the original Black Douglas, bears the name of James, succeeded to a princely inheritance, as well as a family history unequalled by that of any other family in the nobilities of Europe, except his own junior line, which is still represented in the Peerage of Scotland by two Dukes, a Marquis, and three Earls, who own between them six hundred thousand acres of Scotland, as well as a good slice of England, where there are two more Douglas Peers.

Besides the nine Douglas Peers, there are sundry Douglas Baronets and Lairds, whose pedigrees and possessions go back to the Middle Ages. All of them, like the Peers, spring from the Knight of the Black Water, the fortunate brother of Freskin, and contemporary of Richard Cœur de Lion.

One Douglas of the junior line married a Queen of Scotland, who was the sister of the King of England, and from the marriage of his grandson with Mary, Queen of Scots, have sprung all the sovereigns of the United Kingdom. His descendant by another wife is Premier Peer of Scotland and Duke in England, Scotland and France. Two Earls of the elder line were Sovereign-Dukes of Touraine in France; there is a Duke of Touraine and Douglas still, but not in our Peerage. Several Earls of both lines married the daughters of their Sovereigns, and one Red Douglas of the last century married the daughter of a German Sovereign.

The Douglas Romance is the Romance of Mirabel Douglas, the cousin, and, since, the heir of the twenty-fifth Earl; of his son, the late Lord Avondale, who, by the older usage of the House, would have styled himself Master of Douglas; and of Oliver Gray, Junior, who is the owner and manager of the *Babylon Theatre*, where Mirabel Douglas made her début as the leading lady. And in the Romance The Douglas himself plays no little part, down to the beginning of the present year.

Having made this explanation about the descendants of the "Good Sir James of Douglas," who carried the heart of the Bruce, I will leave the reader to peruse their Romance. But I must digress one moment to add an Englishman's tribute to the splendour of Scotland's achievement in the present war. For while Scotland has furnished us with Haigs and Monros and Robertsons to lead us, she has poured into our ranks the whole of her fighting manhood, who, in their military virtues, are to Britain what the Prussians are to Germany. To use the phraseology of the Bible, which never falls strangely upon Scottish ears, the Empire, in response to its call for men, might say: "I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat."

I take this opportunity of acknowledging my indebtedness to Sir Herbert Maxwell's fascinating "History of the House of Douglas," which gave me the conception of this romance, and to his personal help in making clear the points in the story of the Black Douglas about which I was in doubt.

Also to Mr. W. A. Lindsay, K.C., D.L., Peerage Counsel and Windsor Herald, for very valuable information about the pedigree of the Earls of Douglas and the exceptional use of the title Master of Douglas by an Earl's son.

And I am indebted in a similar way to the undisputed monarch of musical comedy, whom I cross-examined as to the possibility of my various green-room episodes.

And, last but not least, to the gallant soldiers recently returned from the fighting line in France, who gave me the material for my battle scenes and criticized them before they went to the printer.

DOUGLAS SLADEN.

*The Avenue House, Richmond, Surrey.
Leap Year Day, 1916.*



THE DOUGLAS SHIELD.

THE DOUGLAS ROMANCE

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING MIRABEL DOUGLAS

THE Villa Visconti, with its tired old arches framing the sky on a rocky headland, is the loveliest spot on Lake Como. A winding stair connects its hanging gardens, and leads down to an old walled harbour, with a worn stone saint guarding its entrance. The crimson of its oleanders flames far down the lake.

Day after day, on an antique marble bench by the harbour steps, sat a girl, with southern beauty and glorious black hair, as if she dreamed that a fairy prince would arrive for her some day, if only she were ready to spring into his boat, when he came.

A woman's longings had come to her, and she was growing weary of a lonely life in the midst of so much loveliness. To her a perfect marriage meant perfect bliss, and her beautiful Italian mother, herself a Visconti, had told her that she must never look for bliss with an Italian husband, and made her turn a deaf ear to the charming young princes and counts who came to their villas on the lake in the summer (and set a high standard for fairy princes in their exteriors), though she welcomed their society as a relief from her own company.

She had been very lonely since her mother died, for her grandmother, who came to keep house for them, was more frightened for her than her mother had been, since the modest inheritance which would be hers, added to her beauty, made her a prize to poor Italian nobles. Mirabel knew only too well what an unhappy marriage meant, for it was her Scottish father's neglect which had driven her mother to the grave, and he came of the race which attaches most

sanctity to marriage. Now he was so occupied with his gambling and his friendship for Ginevra, a woman who had given up a high position in the opera at La Scala to be the favourite of the late Duke of Lombardy, that he was almost a stranger to her.

But it was to Ginevra that she owed her being allowed to live in her grandmother's apartment at Milan in the winter to attend the Conservatorium, and the Conservatorium promised her another of her dreams, a position in opera, like Ginevra had held ; for she had a glorious voice.

Mirabel worked at her singing and dramatic courses with ardour and delight, until at the end of the second winter she discovered that she had been allowed to go to the Conservatorium solely because it gave her father more freedom with Ginevra.

Then she withdrew from it, to return no more, in spite of the protests of the professors at losing a pupil who, with such a voice and such beauty, might come within an ace of being a *prima donna*.

When she went back to the Lake with another dream gone she was very bitter.

She did not upbraid her father : it would only have resulted in her losing the little of him which she still retained. But she sat and brooded on the Ginevas and all their works. The serpent had stolen into her Eden. She had lost her old joy in the green mountains which came down to the lake, with the white Alps behind them ; in the league-long lines of oleanders, which flashed their crimson on both shores ; in the old-world villages, with arcades overhanging the water ; in the villas which recalled the villas of the ancient Romans, with their colonnades and fountains, half hidden in thickets of jessamine and roses, and their broad flights of old grey steps sweeping down to the lake ; in the vineyards and gardens of olives, and groves of solemn chestnuts above them ; in the gay head-kerchiefs and lovely faces of the young peasant women, who swung down the hill-paths with such perfect grace, carrying baskets of great ruddy peaches on their heads ; or in the big brown boats, with shapes and sails which belonged to the youth of the world.

She could think of them no more because the vision of the baleful Ginevra hung over the lake like the brigand, who was a Pope's brother, in the days of yore.

And so she lived on, in a home which was as beautiful as any in the world, but yet was no home, till her father died, leaving her a small competence. Then, without hesitation, she determined to go to England, to try and win fame upon the stage, partly for its own sake, partly because success there would give her the chance of meeting the husband of her dreams.

Her grandmother, who was an old woman, and was conscious that a Visconti, not over-endowed with this world's goods, would not count for the same in London as in Lombardy, refused to go with her. So she followed the advice of an English girl she had met while studying at the Conservatorium, who recommended her to go through a course at the Royal Lyceum of Music in London, before she attempted to go on the London stage.

"I was there," said Lilian ffoulkes, "and I can give you a letter to the principal, Dr. Cantelupe, and one or two of my friends who haven't left yet. I don't think you'll learn anything in music, but they have a dramatic department, where you can get some training as an actress. It will make a great difference to you when you are applying for a part, if you have the Lyceum to fly to for protection, in case you run across horrid people, besides having someone to give you references."

Mirabel Douglas thought she could take care of herself. But she caught at the word "references."

"Do you think that their references could count more than those of the Conservatorium of Milan?" she asked sceptically.

"Well, if you want to go in for musical comedy, as you say you do, I'm certain that they would! Are you 'death on' musical comedy?"

"It was dear old Regalbuto at the Conservatorium who put the idea into my head. He used to say: 'You might get into grand opera, Signorina Mirabella, but the people who knew would always say that you were not 'strong' enough for it. But in musical comedy, with your voice and your appearance and your *simpatica*, you might be the queen.'"

"Did Signor Regalbuto say that?" asked Lilian excitedly.

"Yes, often."

"Well, that's something to go on, because he was a singer's agent in London before he came to Milan."

Thus it was that Mirabel Douglas found herself a student at the Royal Lyceum of Music in London. If she had gone to the Royal College of Music, it is not likely that her light would have remained long under a bushel. But the Lyceum, though the personality of Dr. Cantelupe was soon to work wonders there, was not yet the equal of either the College or the Academy. Managers did not look to it. Its attractive announcements about a dramatic department had only caught Mirabel because she had always lived in Italy, and did not know the status of the various musical institutions in London.

As it happened, its dramatic instruction was very good, because, for reasons of economy, the head of its department, Professor Rhodes, was a person of no name as an actor, who really understood his business, instead of a well-known actor, engaged as an advertisement, who would give it as little time and trouble as he might.

He was, of course, enchanted with Mirabel, in whom he felt that he had a pupil who would take London by storm.

Her voice and her personality were enchanting, and she had a wonderful presence, for her figure and movements were full of the grace of Italy ; her great eloquent Sicilian eyes, of iron-grey, which looked blue in some lights and black in others, and her shining raven hair drew attention to the beauty of her face and its expression ; and she had the caressing smile and soft, alluring laugh which the women of the South have inherited from Circe, "the daughter of the Sun."

CHAPTER II

WANTED—A LEADING LADY

MIRABEL'S course at the Royal Lyceum was coming to a close, when one day Dr. Cantelupe drew her attention to an advertisement which was appearing in a large number of papers.

"Wanted : a leading lady for the new musical comedy to be produced at the *Babylon Theatre*.—Apply, the Manager."

"You ought to try for this," he said. "From the plays I have seen there, I don't fancy that their leading ladies

require to have had much experience in acting ; I have never seen one who could act. And you have an unusually good voice—and, may I say it, dear Miss Douglas ?—an unusually attractive appearance ! ”

Mirabel smiled indulgently, and asked how she should set about applying for it.

“ We can give you testimonials of the highest class,” he said. “ I can honestly recommend you for the post. And, for the rest, I don’t think that you can do anything better than go to the theatre and wait your turn.”

Several of the students, girls as well as men, asked her if she had seen the advertisement, and suggested that she should apply. She was a general favourite, on account of her beauty and unselfishness ; her voice was the pride of the Lyceum. It was significant that none of the other girls dreamed of applying if she was a candidate.

On the morning appointed she made her way to the *Babylon Theatre*, and was shown into the office of Mr. Macca-baeus, the assistant manager, who was entrusted with the task of weeding out the applicants—solely, as it seemed, by personal appearance—for he examined them critically from head to foot, and made no suggestion of trying their voices. Those of whom he approved he asked to step into the adjoining room, and Mirabel was among them.

She felt very ill at ease in that waiting-room, for the others were, without exception, beauties of the old musical-comedy type, very stagey and ultra-fashionably dressed, but mostly very attractive in their colouring—natural or otherwise.

She was the last to be called into the managerial sanctum, because they were all known to fame on the “ musical stage.”

CHAPTER III

THE BABYLON THEATRE

THE *Babylon Theatre*, Trafalgar Square, was built in a style which was a vulgar, if impressive, travesty of Babylonian architecture. It had a Babylonian tower at each corner of its façade. Each tower contained a lift and a spiral staircase, one communicating with the theatre offices

and the other with the proprietor's flat, both of which were built on the roof of the theatre, and commanded admirable views of the Thames, the Embankment, and London's chimneys and church towers.

The theatre belonged to a certain "Oliver Gray, Junior," who had not long left Oxford when, by the murder of his father, he became the king of musical comedy.

He had been christened John, not Oliver, but when he succeeded to the business, yielding to the advice of Ticknor and Fields, the great theatrical lawyers, because the name "Oliver Gray" was worth so much from the business point of view, he decided to conduct his business under the name of "Oliver Gray, Junior," his nickname at Oxford, where he had derived importance in the fast set from his connection with a theatre so attractive to the gilded youth.

Mr. Gray sat in his office, which had four doors; one led into his secretary's room, one into the hall of the offices, one into the hall of his own apartments, and one into the study adjoining his dressing-room, which contained a private telephone, and the phonographs into which he dictated, if he had letters to answer after hours.

The office in which he transacted his business was a very large room, with walls decorated in the Babylonian style. This did not inconvenience him, because he needed no books or pictures, but the idea was one of his father's Barnum touches. There was nothing in the room except a large table, also intended to be Babylonian, with writing materials, and various sumptuous arm-chairs, which buried their castors in a luxurious Turkey carpet. The deeper and more sumptuous a chair was, the more a woman displayed her ankles, and if a woman does not possess neat ankles, her other qualifications for musical comedy must be very special.

When Mirabel Douglas was shown into the room, she saw sitting at the table a most charming-looking man, much under thirty, slim, well groomed, with a very fair complexion, which was the picture of cleanliness and health—in fact, a well-bred man, who looked as if he had spent his life in active sports.

There was nothing to suggest the theatrical manager with a reputation for "affairs." Any faint suggestion of influence over women which there was about him was much more noticeable in the Guards' officers who frequented his stalls.

He rose and came forward to shake hands and show her into the chair which, from the direction of the light, enabled him to study the physical qualifications of his applicants best.

Mirabel had walked up from the Royal Lyceum, and as it was a wet day, and she wished to take care of her voice, she had on a favourite rain-proof coat and skirt of silvery-grey cord—silver was her colour—and boots which would stand rain, very ladylike and beautifully laced.

When he went back to his seat he took in at a glance the grace of her limbs, and the fact that the rain had been allowed to beat on her clear, colourless cheeks.

Now it so happened that the applicants who had been interviewing him during the past hour were, most of them, very painted ladies, very florid about their feet, and with cascades of chiffons in their costumes, who had made him shudder with their notions of charm and *chic*.

When he contrasted them with this woman, of the class he had met when staying with his Eton and Oxford friends, looking, with her rain-freshened face, as if she had just come in from a round of golf, he felt as if he had suddenly stepped out of the darkness and foul air of a cinema hall into the sunshine of an April afternoon.

She, at all events, must be tried. He asked her what she could give him to show her powers. She suggested the waltz-song from *The Merry Widow*. He blew down for Farini, his accompanist, and Stradella, the wonderful Italian who invented the dances and rehearsed the dancing of his pieces for him. Stradella knew every part in every musical comedy—not the words of any of them, but the action, just what you would see in a cinema—and, of course, the music.

The accompanist, like Stradella, was a Milanese, and they were filled with verve when she gave them their instructions in Italian which was not only fluent, but was the language of Lombardy.

There was no mistaking the result. She could sing gloriously—if not with the greatness demanded by grand opera, at any rate with the sympathy and coquetry which are more necessary for musical comedy. Her coquettices with Stradella were reinforced by a stream of arch whispers in Italian.

Dancing presented more difficulties. The fact that she

did the waltz with uncommon grace was not sufficient for impressing "Oliver Gray, Junior," since she only waltzed as she would in a drawing-room, without the brilliant trick-dancing, which is the feature of the waltz-scene as it was given at *Daly's*. And the scene was falling rather flat without it, when Stradella, whose soul she had captured, and who was on tenterhooks lest she should not get the post, cried: "*La tarantella, Contessa*, can you not dance *la tarantella?*"

"*La tarantella?* ah, si!" she replied, throwing herself into a *tarantella* pose. "And play it as you would play for the love of God and me!"

"*La tarantella!*" said Stradella to the accompanist in Italian, grandly.

Farini, who was much attached to the ardent and whimsical Stradella, literally threw himself into the spirit of the thing, and in a few minutes Gray, *blasé* as he was with seeing beautiful and clever dancers exerting every wile to win his approbation and get a post, could not contain his admiration.

The *tarantella* is not so much a beautiful dance as one which lends itself to individuality and humour, and with the accompanist straining every nerve to adapt himself to her moods, Mirabel filled it with her glowing personality.

Stradella signed to the accompanist: the music died down. Mirabel, panting and radiant, turned to Gray to see the effect on him.

"Bravo!" he cried. "Bravo! You are immense!"

"Am I good enough for the part?" asked the practical Mirabel.

"I think so," he said, with a smile which belied the hesitation of the words. But the caution of habit arrested him, and he added: "I'll write in a few days to give you a formal decision. I may say that you are one of the selected candidates."

Mirabel, anxious as she was to get the post, could not resist a feeling of relief at his hesitation, for it soothed an apprehension she had experienced as she noticed the way he was looking at her when she first sat down to be examined and when she finished the *tarantella* and turned to him for his approval.

It was his artistic and professional appraise which she

sought, and she had found something very akin to sex-interest mingled with it. Instinct told her to expect some advance which she dreaded—and it had not come. Therefore she was grateful.

The girls at the Royal Lyceum, when they heard that she was going to apply for the prima-donnaship at the *Babylon Theatre*, had laughingly warned her against Oliver Gray, Junior. He was the most dangerous lady-killer in London, they said. Rumour was for ever coupling his name with this or the other beauty of his Cast or his Chorus. His successes were notorious, for in addition to his wealth and his power to push a girl in her theatrical career, he was very good-looking, and had a most engaging personality.

Mirabel did not realize the full significance of their charges; she thought they only referred to kissing. But that was quite enough to disgust her. She thought it infamous of him to use his power in this way. That he should enjoy any success of this sort with her was unthinkable. She told herself that these women, who gave in to him, were of common origin, without traditions of dignity and the spur of honour to rouse their mettle, while she, a Douglas, whose ancestors had resisted kings at the head of their armies, could maintain her own.

If she received the post, and he afterwards forced himself on her, she would throw it up at once. What the law said about contracts she did not know and did not care. At all events, his behaviour would come out in the courts, and the law must take her side then—she told herself.

None of her friends in the Royal Lyceum knew Oliver Gray by sight, and Mirabel had pictured to herself a sleek and particularly gorgeous Jew, turned out to perfection in the full dress of the Stock Exchange.

In this, at least, she was disappointed. Nothing could have looked less like a Jew than Oliver Gray, with his short straight nose, short upper lip, ruddy colouring and merry blue eyes. He looked like one of the young Grenadiers who thronged the stalls at the *Babylon*, and furnished the models of the heroes in most of its pieces. He was dressed in tweeds, with the vague suggestion of sport which distinguishes well-dressed men.

He was, on the contrary, charmingly respectful and

considerate. But she could not be unconscious of the fact that he did let his admiration for her person be seen, when she had finished her *tarantella*, and appealed to his verdict.

No sooner had she left the room than the Chief, as they called him in the theatre, turned to Stradella and said : " If I engage her, can't you do something to improve her dancing ? That *tarantella* business is all very well, but you couldn't ask Mary, Queen of Scots, to dance a *tarantella* in the presence of John Knox, and there's no suggestiveness about her dancing—the stalls simply wouldn't stick it."

" Suggestiveness is just another name for what you couldn't expect of her," said Mr. Maccabaeus, always known as old Mac. He was accustomed to express himself freely, and Gray, though at first he did not like it, even from his father's right-hand man, had now recognized its utility. Old Mac greatly disliked the relations which had existed between the Chief and his last two leading ladies, because the ladies tended to get out of hand.

" Well, Chief," he continued, " if you're really in earnest about introducing a romantic element into our pieces, I don't see that Miss Douglas needs this kind of dancing. We've never had such a voice at the *Babylon* before, and she has the makings of a much better actress than we generally get, and as for the dancing—old Strad admits that she can waltz A 1, and the ' Widow ' and ' Waltz Dream ' show that we can manage perfectly well with waltzing, if she can't do the other thing."

" Won't," said Oliver.

" Well, won't, if you like, and small blame to her ! " said old Mac. " If it's only a leading lady you want, I say you've got her—it's Mary, Queen of Scots, we're looking for, not a Columbine ! "

" What do you think about it, Strad ? " asked Gray.

" Well, I don't think you want the dancing more ' popular ' in character than they had it in the ' Waltz Dream '—not for this piece, which is going to be history."

" You think she'd do, then ? What do you say, Mac ? "

" Well, I shouldn't call her an actress, but I don't consider that you've ever had an actress in this theatre. I think she'll draw the public."

" Even the first four rows ? "

" Oh, they're all right. They're so *blasés*, that if they

can't see where a woman's wickedness comes in, they think she must be all the more wicked!"

"And do you consider that's all they come for?"

"Beauty and Badness—what more?"

"And you, Strad?"

"Well, dancing doesn't only consist of dancing, and in her movements Miss Douglas is top-hole!"

"Then you both think that I ought to have her?"

"I should," said Old Mac. "If you advertised because you want to give them something fresh, she's the one."

Gray thought so, too. It was ultra-important that for Mary, Queen of Scots, one of the most beautiful and romantic figures in history, he should choose a woman with whom the audiences would fall in love, as he had done. That they would share his sentiments he had no doubt. Her black hair, and her great Sicilian eyes, which had such depths of tragedy latent in them, though her face was transformed with mirth when it broke into the exquisite laugh of the Italian beauty, would make her a truly romantic figure for the Queen of Mischance. And being a lady with distinction of manner counted also. Mary, Queen of Scots, must look a lady. It would be easy to spread the impression through the newspapers, he told himself, that Mirabel was one of *the Douglases*, who had played such a part round the Scottish throne since the days of the Bruce. If it was not a fact it was of no consequence.

Yes, she was just what the theatre required. And he—he wanted to possess her more than any woman he had ever met. There was but one way to do it. He had only to look at Mirabel to know that she would not be what Tara had been to him.

That one way was to marry her. It would make her his. And she would be a help rather than a hindrance to his retaining his intimacy with his Eton friends, who could not, if he married the ordinary musical-comedy star, go on seeing so much of him as they had while he was a bachelor. So he dismissed Old Mac and Stradella and took up his pen to write, a very rare thing with him.

He was not vain enough to think that Mirabel's assent was an assured thing. But he could offer her a dazzling career, and he hoped that she would not consider marriage too high a price for this. He wrote her a brief note:

THE DOUGLAS ROMANCE

"*The Babylon Theatre, S.W.,*
" *Monday, August —th, 1913.*

"DEAR MISS DOUGLAS,

" Could you call on Thursday afternoon at 4.0 p.m.
to discuss terms ?

"Yours very truly,
"OLIVER GRAY, JUNIOR."

She wrote back :

"100, *Clareville Studios,*
" *Gloucester Road, S.W.,*
" *Tuesday, August —th, 1913.*

"DEAR MR. GRAY,

" I would much rather that the question of terms
should be left to Dr. Cantelupe. We can discuss anything
else.

"Yours truly,
"MIRABEL DOUGLAS."

To which he sent her a reply by special messenger :

" Please keep the appointment. There are other points
to settle besides salary, penalties, and length of engagement.
"O. G."

To which she sent back a line by the messenger :

" Very well ; I will come.—M. D."

CHAPTER IV

THE LURE OF MEPHISTOPHELES

MIRABEL had a great belief in her future, yet she dared not believe that it was true that she, who had never acted in public, except at the gala night of the Conservatorium of Singing at Milan—and that in Italian—was to be the leading lady at the great *Babylon Theatre* ! It was too good to be true. She registered a vow not to tell her friends.

But the girls of the college were far too excited about it to let her rest in silence. She had to admit that she was one of the selected candidates, and it was incredible to them that anyone would be prefered to their idol—their lovely, gifted Mirabel, who was as unselfish about competitions as she was about money.

On the Thursday, when she went to Oliver Gray's office, she was shown straight in, and found herself alone with him. He received her very courteously, but almost shyly, which gratified her, and asked where she would sit. There was a chair on the opposite side of the writing table from where he sat ; she took that. He seemed rather disconcerted, and begged her to choose something more comfortable.

"No, I'll take this chair," she said, "for I have to be very business-like."

He grew more uncomfortable. At that close range those eyes of hers seemed to look through him, and he had a difficult explanation to make.

He was conscious that she must have heard of his reputation as a libertine. His intuition told him that he was dealing with an impulsive woman ; but as she sat there, she was cool and guarded, afraid to be enthusiastic, even about the magnificent prospect which he was opening up before her. He remembered how expansive Tara had been when the post was offered to her.

The ladies of the *Babylon* had a large acquaintance amongst the officers of His Majesty's Guards, and lived like rich women. They did say that one of the Guards' regiments took the front row of the stalls by the season, for the privilege of going behind the scenes.

It was plain that the woman before him did not belong to this school of actress, but to the new school, which passes into private life the moment it leaves the stage door, and not infrequently makes a parade of domesticity. It was the first time that one had invaded the *Babylon*, which flourished on the wages of sin. Nor under ordinary circumstances would she have stood any chance of acceptance. The *Babylon Theatre* had not sought the rewards of virtue. It had been willing to let Virtue retain them as its own.

But Oliver Gray had fallen in love with Mirabel, and he felt a conviction that his patrons would like the novelty, and he judged that she might be sufficiently ambitious and

in love with her Art to be determined to captivate the public, if she was indifferent or averse to captivating him. Her coolness made him covet her the more, since it made the situation more difficult.

As is usual with men when they have something very important to say, he avoided the point and wasted time on asking questions so unimportant that Mirabel began to think him as fussy as an old maid.

In despair of his getting to the point, she interrupted him at last with the plain question : "Have you decided which of the selected candidates is to have it?"

"Well, yes, in a way," he said slowly. "I have decided in your favour. But it depends on a condition."

"And that condition is . . . ?"

"That you should marry me."

"That I should marry you! . . . and what on earth has that to do with it?"

"Simply that I can make you the greatest musical-comedy actress of the day, and I don't wish to do it unless you are mine."

Her anger rose. A rich crimson poured into her clear white cheeks. She looked superbly handsome. . . . She did not care if her words cost her the post—she was so furious at what she took him to mean.

"So you consider that your royal patronage can make me a star in musical comedy!—that you have only to say it, and the thing is done . . . but you won't say it unless I sell myself to you as your wife?"

"Do you think you're being fair to me, Miss Douglas?" he asked quietly.

She looked him over coolly, almost insolently. If he had not been in love with her, he would have closed the interview and the whole matter.

"No, I don't think I am; but I don't see what else your words can mean!"

"Will you listen fairly to what I am going to say?"

"Yes," she said, but her voice sounded unconvinced.

"Well, if you were taking the leading part at the *Babylon* to-night, the audience might be charmed with your looks and your voice and your coquettices, but as an actress you would be a dead failure. You know nothing of the stage tricks of musical comedy, you know nothing of how to play

upon the appreciation of the various elements, which compose a *Babylon* audience. The mere gazing from a brilliantly-lighted stage into the darkness of the auditorium, the having to speak at people whom you could not see might upset you, and so might the large number of people with whom at intervals you would have to act on my stage. Stage artifices and pretences count for a lot in musical comedy ; improvising to suit the temper of the house counts for a good deal, though not so much for you as for the low comedians. I can't act 'for nuts' myself, but I've brought the training of my leading ladies down to a fine point."

" You mean that it is the training you can give me which will make my success ? "

" Added to your natural gifts and the position."

" Well, I can understand that, but I don't see what it has to do with my marrying you."

" There are only two holds you can have on a leading lady, and marriage is the only one which applies to you. Otherwise the moment a contract is up, when she has arrived at her best, America takes her. America can afford bigger salaries than we can, now that leading actors and actresses go to the Halls. Their combination of 'variety houses' is wonderful. They can give prices which we can't touch. They've got Tara, and they have Daphne Duveen, who was my leading lady before her."

" And you want to deprive me of these chances ? "

" I can pay you as much as any actress has a right to desire, and I want to keep you at my theatre. You understand now, don't you ? "

" Yes. I think I do."

" Will you marry me, then ? The post is yours if you will."

" I don't think that there's the least chance of it, but if you like, I will delay my answer for twenty-four hours to find out more about you."

" Oh, well, you won't have any difficulty about that ! Get to know Mrs. Candour of 'The Talk of the Town,' and she'll give you all the reasons you want for not marrying me, inside of half an hour."

" I am not the kind of woman who listens to scandal," said Mirabel proudly. " But you must understand that

I am as eager about my life as I am about my Art. A woman with as many attractive points as I have—I think I may say that without conceit—has a right to expect an ideal marriage, with a husband whom she can appreciate, and who will appreciate her. I have enough money to keep me from want, and I shall make money in my profession. Anything my husband makes will be to the good. But I will have a happy married life. I will not sell the happiness of my home."

"I will make you happy—I swear it!"

"I want to find out what the chances of that are. If they are favourable, I shall marry you. If they are not, and you stick to your resolution, I suppose you will have to find another leading lady?"

"Don't let's imagine anything so awful until we find that it's a certainty. In the interval, will you trust a bad man sufficiently to come into his flat, and have a cup of tea?"

She smiled. "I'm not afraid of anything except doing what I may live to regret. I should like to see the home which I am invited to share."

He opened the door which led into his hall, traversed the hall, and opening another door, small and arched, ushered her into the most extraordinary drawing-room she had ever seen. It had no windows; and instead of a ceiling it had a huge glass cupola, which had a gallery seven feet wide running round it about fifteen feet from the ground, and leaving an opening about fifteen feet in diameter. The gallery, which was furnished with tables and chairs and lounges, commanded wonderful views of London's roofs and spires, and a fine bit of the Thames, and it could be entered from below by a steep, straight staircase, not two feet wide, and panelled on each side with carved and inlaid dark wood, which had once led up to the pulpit of a mosque in Cairo.

The drawing-room itself had its walls and the underside of its gallery, which was supported by Moorish arches, covered with gilt and fretted plaster work, copied from the Alhambra. It was furnished with luxurious divans and rare old Eastern rugs, and every species of costly Arab and Persian bric-à-brac. It was intended to present, and it presented, the *ne plus ultra* of Arab luxury. And the

absence of windows, which was to shut out London sights and sounds, completed the illusion.

"I have had tea laid up in the gallery. Most people enjoy the novelty of taking it in the midst of London's roofs and steeples, but we can easily have it moved down here if you like."

"Oh, no, upstairs, please!" said Mirabel, almost querulously.

He looked at her in surprise. She did not notice the look—she was preoccupied with her own thoughts. That drawing-room gave her the idea of a harem, and brought to her mind all that the girls had told her of his reputation. She almost gasped to be up in the sunshine of the gallery, surrounded by honest London chimneys.

"You are quite right," he said. "I hate this room in the daytime. It makes you feel so boxed up, only to have a skylight, for that's what the cupola comes to! It's one of the governor's ideas. The scenic artist was seldom out of his thoughts."

She was a little mollified by his tone, though the drawing-room had made a very bad impression. But she did not allow this to interfere with the natural graciousness of manner which had made her popular with the Italian aristocracy who had villas round Lake Como.

He was surprised that the sort of conversation, which had often won him the reputation of a good talker in smart houses, fell flat with her, till she mentioned that she had lived most of her life in Italy. And this gave him an opinion of Italy (concerning which he knew nothing), more applicable to the Balkans.

His ignorance amused, though it bored her. To escape from it, she said, "What do you do for exercise?"

"Pretty nearly everything, except cricket and football. I gave them up when I left Oxford. I don't race, because I prefer to do my plunging on musical comedies, but I hunt a bit in winter, because I shouldn't have the face to go to my country place if I didn't. Everybody golfs and tennises and boats a bit."

"Are you fond of sport?" she asked suddenly.

"Of course I am! A day never seems a day to me unless I've played something in it—if it is only a game of billiards."

" And you shoot and fish ? "

" That's like hunting—you've got to do it, or you lose the respect of your neighbours ! I'm rather good at pigeons, not far from the first flight."

He was, in fact, a very noted shot at the Gun Club, to which he often motored down. He liked the shooting, and he gambled heavily on it ; gambling never affected his nerve.

The conversation about sport soon flagged, because she knew no more about sport than he knew about Italy.

Partly for something to say, partly because it interested him to learn as much as he could about this beautiful and fascinating woman, he asked if she had any people in London. She had told him that she was living in a studio, when he asked for her address.

" My father and mother are dead," she replied, " and I haven't a relation in London that I've ever seen."

" Then—you will excuse my saying so—but a woman who is as beautiful as you are, and intends to make her living in musical comedy, ought to be married."

" One for me and two for yourself," she said.

" No ! seriously."

" Well, I can't possibly marry you till I know more about you."

" Do think it over," he said, " it's worth it."

She took a dreary 'bus back to her dreary studio, and lay awake nearly all night, thinking about it. To have London at her feet in a flash of time . . . what a prospect ! And she might have it if she accepted this offer. But two visions held her back : the vision of Faust in the tragedy in which she had gone to see Duse act, while she was wintering in Milan, and the vision which she had so often seen before her, as she sat by the harbour steps at her beloved villa on Lake Como.

It was the story of Faust over again, but it was Margaret, not Faust, on whom Mephistopheles, decked out in the splendid manhood of Oliver Gray, was pressing his temptations. He was offering her success beyond her rosiest dream, if she would sell her soul to him—a path strewn with gold and flowers . . . instant fame, constant rewards. And nine women out of ten would have been glad to listen to Oliver Gray if he had no rewards to offer them beyond his

fascinating personality, and freedom from pecuniary cares. There was nothing in him to which a woman could object, but his past and his profession, and the latter could be no objection to her, since she was trying to enter it herself.

If she accepted the offer of Mephistopheles she must expect to pay the price, and the price was that she could never, while Gray was alive, look forward to the perfect marriage which to her mind presented the only chance of perfect happiness. As she thought of this, the vision of the plausible Mephistopheles made way for a vision of those hanging gardens, bathed in the spring sunshine, by the side of a tall, fair English Galahad, whom she could adore, and need not mistrust like the guileful lovers of her mother's race. All her dreams had been of a Galahad whose life was like a fresh white page, for her to write on. She had witnessed her mother's loneliness, her father's wanderings ; and she hoped that she might never be the unhappy woman that Elisabetta Douglas, born Visconti, had been.

But on the other hand, she might thrust away the fair flowers of fame only to find that the garland of love, which she chose to gather, had withered in a night. And she, an exile in the land of her fathers, with not a relative whom she knew, might find herself lonelier and more broken than her mother !

While, if she accepted the brilliant offer before her, though she might miss love—might miss the perfect marriage which was her dream—in place of the dethroned King there might be a whole republic of delightful friendships, for a beautiful and famous woman may have her pick of the fairest friendships which the world has to offer.

Should the chance of perfect love outweigh the certainty of fame and fair friendships ?

She knew that she ought to cleave to her ideal ; too often in Italy had she seen the sad spectacle of love dethroned. And she felt an almost invincible repulsion to marrying a man who had not only been guilty of libertinism, but from whom libertinism had been expected, as folly might be prophesied of another.

So directly she came down in the morning, before she ate a morsel, she sent a district messenger round to Gray's flat over the theatre, with this answer.

“ 100, Clareville Studios,
“ Gloucester Road,
“ South Kensington.
“ Aug. —th, 1913.

“ DEAR MR. GRAY,

“ You will have to find another leading lady. I cannot marry you.

“ M. D.”

Oliver Gray was still at breakfast—he began and ended his day late—when it was brought to him. He knew the writing, and opened it before he gave so much as a glance at the voluminous correspondence from important people which awaited him.

He set his teeth and put it in his pocket. He was a man not easily deterred when he had made up his mind to a thing.

A silver clip of telegram-forms always stood beside his letters on the breakfast table, so that he could write a telegram while the letter was fresh in his memory. What he did not leave to his secretary to answer, he mostly answered by telegram. He telegraphed to her :

“ MISS DOUGLAS, 100, CLAREVILLE STUDIOS, GLOUCESTER ROAD, SOUTH KENSINGTON, S.W.—Please be in at 4.30 to receive a messenger from me.—OLIVER GRAY.”

Punctually at four-thirty she heard a car drive up to the entrance of the studios, and a few moments afterwards, when she called “ Come in ! ” to a knock at her door, Oliver Gray himself entered.

“ This is a trick ! ” she cried hotly. “ You said you were sending a messenger ! ”

“ I did it on purpose. If I had said that I was coming, you would have had an aunt die, or anything, as a reason for not being at home.”

“ I suppose I should,” she said, her anger melting a little. “ Well, your cleverness has been successful—what do you want with me ? ”

“ I want you to marry me.”

“ I wrote to tell you that I wouldn’t. That’s flat.”

“ It isn’t. I don’t intend to take *no* for an answer.”

" You can't compel me to marry you."

" I mean to win you to. Why do you refuse ? "

" Because of your past. You have no right to ask a good woman to marry you."

" Everybody has a past. If I promise you to turn over a new leaf, and be absolutely faithful to you, will you marry me ? "

" And involve your breaking your word to other women ? Certainly not ! "

" There is no one to break it to. I told you that Tara had gone to America."

" There is someone else."

" There is no one else."

" No, I could not marry a man who has led the life you have."

" This is all a misapprehension. You are misjudging me. I will not take *no* for an answer."

" You will not take *no* for an answer because you have taken a mad freak into your head that I am the woman who will suit you for the part of Mary Stuart. Why can't I make a contract with you for five or ten or twenty years, or sentence myself to you for life ? "

" I have told you," he said, knowing well how disingenuously he was speaking, " that it is because the first time you have a fortnight's holiday you might take a trip to America, and snap your fingers in my face."

" Is that so ? "

" It is."

Being a woman she knew that this was not the whole truth, that there was another reason behind it—that it was love, not self-interest, which was speaking. And it is hard for a woman not to forgive this. But this would not have made Mirabel Douglas relent, seeing what she had seen in her mother's life. She yielded because she was suddenly struck with the conviction that Gray had entered into her life before, and then she recognized him as the tall, fair Englishman who had figured in her dreams, and she felt an irresistible impulse to give him the trial for which he prayed.

But she showed no outward sign of her weakening, as she said :

" Look here, Mr. Gray. If you only want me as a great

actress—me, who have never played a single part—and are afraid of losing me as soon as you have taught me my business, I'll make a bargain with you. If you'll make the proper settlements on me, so that I shall be free to follow my own life, I'll marry you on this other condition : that if, after living with you for a month, you cannot by fair means make me change my mind, I shall be free to live apart from you without any molestation, legal or otherwise."

He ran over the aspects of the proposal rapidly in his mind. First, if she was once married to him she could not marry anyone else, so she would be his to win all his life, even if he could take no active measures to conquer her after the first month.

Secondly, if she gave him a just chance in that month, as he supposed she would, he hoped to make her return his love sufficiently to cancel the embargo.

Thirdly, he was so in love with her that the idea of having her as his wife, for only a month, appeared to be worth any sacrifice. For though he could not live with her after that, he would see her every day at the theatre, putting forth all her powers of attraction to win the public, as she never would use them to win him.

And, fourthly, the studio and its furniture looked so dreadfully meagre to him that he must at any cost get the beloved one into a more appropriate setting.

"I promise," he said, and he wondered how she was going to carry out his banishment, after that month, decently and in order. That she would do nothing that was not respectable he felt certain, for it was her respectability which had barred his path.

"Have you any lawyers?" he asked. He intended to carry out his part of the bargain with that loyalty to his word which was proverbial in the theatrical world.

"Yes," she said, intending to ask Dr. Cantelupe whom she should employ.

"Well, my lawyers are Ticknor and Fields, of Lincoln's Inn, and you might ask your lawyers to communicate with them when they have put into form the conditions you are going to impose."

This made her feel as if she had been horrid, and as a peace-offering, she volunteered to make him some tea ; if he could put up with awful cake and awful butter.

"I can eat anything at any time. I have the maw and the digestion of a lobster."

The viands were not choice, but they meant more to him than the finest dinner which could have been given him at the *Carlton*. For this exquisite Mirabel was his fiancée, and this was the first freewill offering which she had ever made to him.

CHAPTER V

MIRABEL'S PACT

MIRABEL went to Lewis and Lewis to make the settlements for that extraordinary marriage. She did well, for some of its provisions were such as no judge would enforce. They concentrated their attention on the theatrical contract, which was a condition of the marriage; for here, in consultation with Mr. Garrick, K.C., the great authority on theatrical law, they had the chance of coming to a binding agreement. It was one condition of the marriage that Mirabel should be leading lady of the *Babylon Theatre* for a period of ten years, at a remuneration to be arranged between the parties. Lewis and Lewis foresaw some keen and protracted negotiating over this clause, at any rate.

But they were agreeably disappointed, for Ticknor and Fields, acting for Oliver Gray, informed them that they had *carte blanche* to agree to any terms which were put forward on behalf of Miss Douglas; but suggested that to avoid the appearance of Mirabel's receiving a salary from her husband, a certain proportion of the profits of the *Babylon Theatre* should be paid to her. It was twice as great a proportion as Mirabel could be persuaded to accept.

The only unhandsome proviso in the whole affair was Mirabel's insisting that a relatively enormous sum should be paid to her, as a fine, if Gray divulged the marriage (which it was agreed should be kept an absolute secret) without her written consent. But when Ticknor and Fields consulted Gray on the telephone about this, he merely replied: "All right—anything."

Lewis and Lewis felt constrained to congratulate their

client on the evident desire of the other side to be more than fair.

A few days later the settlements were finished and the great preparations began. Mirabel chose a much less ambitious house than Gray wished, and disappointed him in the orders which she proposed giving for decoration and furniture. He, having found his Queen Mary, went ahead with his preparations for "Mary, Queen of Scots."

They were to be married in a month, and have a month's honeymoon, and then rehearsals were to begin, and the edict in the settlements was to come into force.

The house which Mirabel chose had been the lifelong home of a famous painter. Its price—Gray bought it for her, so that she could do what she liked with it—was low, because it stood on the confines of Hammersmith and Chiswick on the river-bank. But it had been a country house when it was built, two hundred years ago; and its ramblings reminded Mirabel of her father's villa on Lake Como; and it had a glorious studio, with a parquet floor and oak paneling; and the garden was full of quaint devices, put in by no less a personage than Samuel Richardson, the novelist, for the eighteenth-century courtships which he loved to depict.

They looked dreary in their decay; with plenty of money forthcoming for their judicious restoration by experts they would offer results not easily to be attained in London.

Gray recognized this, and applauded Mirabel's judgment. He pictured how delicious she would look wandering along the stone terrace on to which the French windows of the drawing-room opened—when it had all its balusters—or descending the broad flight of steps—when they were mended—to the gold-fish pond—when it had any water in it.

At the end of the terrace was an odd little circular summer-house, built of stone, and roofed with a battered copper dome. It was like the *cour d'amour* of a castle in Provence. There was a sundial; there were arbours, which in summer were covered with roses.

Mirabel fell in love with that garden, with the gallery-like passages on the upper floors, and with that noble studio, which she pictured full of brilliant people when she came into her own.

Gray had no idea of helping her with her furnishing. He

was accustomed to give his orders, and leave the carrying out of details to others. He considered it niggling to choose furniture for yourself.

She had demanded that there should be no *tête-à-tête*, no love-making, before they were married. He had yielded, because he meant to yield whenever she insisted, and because he believed that if he did not fight over details, she was more likely to yield absolutely, as he meant her to, some day.

There was only one way to make her yield, and that was to make her fall in love with him ; he was positive of that. And he was going to be immensely busy. It was no triflē to combine the musical comedy and the Beerbohm-Tree historical drama. He meant to go much farther than "Merry England." So he never came to the house again until after they had married and ceased to live with each other.

No one at the theatre knew that she was Oliver Gray's fiancée ; no one knew that she was his new leading lady. One day, when she had occasion to see him, she had great difficulty in getting into his office ; he was besieged by women who wanted parts, and was overworked.

"But I am in the new piece—a member of the company!" she explained to a commissionnaire, who looked like Lord Kitchener in his office uniform.

"I daresay you 'as 'opes, ma'am, but my orders is not to let any ladies past unless I knows 'em, and I don't know you."

"But I must see him—he'll be furious when he knows that you have sent me away!"

"That's what they all thinks, but I knows better."

"Will you take in my name on a piece of paper?"

"No, Miss—not that I wouldn't be pleased to oblige you, but papers leads to explanations, and they've no time for explanations."

"What am I to do, then?"

"Well, if you'll take my advice, Miss, you'll go to the nearest public-house—public telephone, I mean ; beg pardon. Miss—and ring up 'is office number—'is secretary will answer you, and take yer message ; and then if Mr. Oliver—that is, Mr. Gray—wishes to see you, he'll tell me what to do."

"But it would be just the same sending my name in on a piece of paper, wouldn't it?"

"Not at all, Miss, for then I should be responsible for

disturbing them, not you—whereas if you 'phones, you'll be responsible, not me."

"Very well, then, to prove that you ought to have admitted me, I'll go and telephone."

"There's a telephone at the chemist next door, Miss."

Mirabel went down to the chemist and rang up Oliver Gray's offices. The chemist looked so hard at her when she asked if it was a public telephone, that she felt sure that he fathomed her errand. He did, of course ; it was the regular avenue to seeing Gray. He might easily have charged a shilling : he kept one of the uncanny chemists' shops of theatre-land.

"Is that Mr. Oliver Gray's offices ?" she asked, when she had put the twopence into the slot, and turned the handle, and heard the coins drop.

"It is, Madam."

"Are you his secretary ?"

"Yes, Madam."

"Will you tell him that Miss Douglas has just called on him and been refused admittance ?"

"Will you tell me what your Christian name is, Madam ? He may know several Miss Douglasses."

"It would be no good giving you my Christian name ; say that it's the Miss Douglas he has just engaged for the new piece."

"I think you had better write, Miss Douglas."

"I assure you that if you don't take my message, and I have to write, Mr. Gray will be very annoyed."

"Mr. Gray will not be annoyed by it, Miss Douglas. It's what I'm here for—to prevent his being disturbed without a reason."

"Coxey," said Oliver, coming to the door, "what are you so long about ? I want you to take down this letter."

"I'm very sorry, sir—there's a lady I can't get rid of. She says that she's been engaged for the new piece, and that she is sure that you will see her ; the name is Miss Douglas, sir."

"Douglas, did you say ? I have engaged a lady of that name. I'll speak, and see if she is the right one. Hallo ! who's there ?"

Mirabel recognized his voice.

"Oh, Oliver, I want to speak to you, and they won't let me get to you—first the commissionaire, and then your

secretary. They won't even take a message for you : they say you'll be grateful to them for refusing to do it."

"I'm so sorry ! Where are you ?"

"At the chemist's shop next door to your theatre."

"Wait there, please, and I'll send my secretary to show you up ; you'll know him because he will bring my card with 'Admit Miss Douglas' written on it. Good-bye till I see you."

In less than a minute the secretary was with her. Gray was acting so unusually that Mr. Coxey thought Miss Douglas must be of some importance. He did not wait for the lift, but ran down the stairs.

When he saw how lovely she was, his suspicions as to her importance were confirmed : she must be the new *Babylon* beauty.

Mr. Coxey was a most agreeable young man—selected for that reason. It was his duty to send most people away without letting them see his chief, but it was also his duty to send them away in a good temper.

"I'm most awfully sorry, Miss Douglas," he said, as he lifted a hat which shone like a looking-glass, "but Mr. Gray had not mentioned your engagement to me."

She looked as if she had been shot. He could not understand her perturbation, but as she evidently belonged to the upper classes, he thought that she might object to the term *engage*, and corrected himself : "Mr. Gray has not mentioned that you have joined his company."

So it was this kind of engagement to which the secretary referred ! She breathed more freely, and said : "Quite so. Will you lead the way ?"

"I should get what you have to say over as quickly as possible," he confided to her, as they were being taken up in the lift. "He's awfully busy."

As they passed the commissionaire, the secretary handed him the card, 'Admit Miss Douglas.' He took it without a word, but the secretary explained to her : "Now he will always send your name in."

"I don't think I shall ever give him the chance again," said Mirabel, laughing. "This isn't the sort of place where one wants to wait about while a commissionaire sees if she is to be admitted."

"You set a pretty good value on yourself !" thought the

secretary ; but he was a wise man and meant to take her at her own valuation till he knew precisely the value which his employer set upon her.

This was exactly what Oliver Gray did not intend him to know, as far as personal relations were concerned. So when he showed her into the private office, he found it empty.

The secretary understood the order of procedure and retired into his own den, whence he told Gray's valet down the speaking-tube to inform his master that the lady had arrived.

" Well, Oliver," said Mirabel as he entered the room, " do you expect to be assassinated ? I shouldn't think that the Czar took such elaborate precautions as you do ! "

" My dear," he said, with a magnetic welcome in his handshake, " you've no conception how awful women can be when there's a new musical comedy going to be put on—it makes you long to have your office in a yacht ! Every woman who is specially good-looking thinks that she has only to ask for a part to get it."

Mirabel felt that this was rather a home-thrust, though she was not vain about her looks.

He read her thoughts and said : " When you applied I was ' asking for ' it : I had advertised for applications."

" And you took me largely on my looks ? "

" You must remember that I was in search of somebody who had to do, not for the ordinary musical-comedy sovereign, but for one of the most beautiful queens in history."

" And was I the one who did best ? "

" Undoubtedly."

Mirabel did not wish to pursue the subject further, so she said : " Would you like to know what I came for ? "

" I should like to know, so that I may do it, if it is possible. But I should like it best if you came for nothing except to see me."

He saw her shrink, and relapsed into ordinary politeness.

" Well, what did you come for—Mirabel ? "

" I came to tell you that things are pretty well arranged at Bolingbroke House"—that was the name of the new house—" and I ought to be thinking about my part. It is my turn to do something now," she said, unbending a little. " What ought I to do about it ? "

He had had his warning just now, so he said quite simply :

"Oh, nothing ! I'm going to teach you your part while we're down at Westernport."

"Can't I do anything till then ?"

"Well, the author suggested that you—that is to say, whoever was going to take the part ; he did not know that it was you—should read a lot of books, which he sent, about Mary and the period, before she began to study the part. That sort of thing is all very well for a play like 'Drake,' but you don't want it for musical comedy. There you don't have to think of facts, or what is correct or probable, or anything else. You have to think of the audience, and the limelight, and the scene-painter, and the stage-carpenter—and the music, of course."

"But I should like to read them ; mayn't I ?"

"I hope that I shall never say *no* to you," he answered, with grave politeness.

This was getting near the quicksands of sentiment, so she asked hurriedly : "Where are the books ?"

"There," he said, pointing to a small table piled with them.

"Which shall I start on ?"

"I can't tell you. I'm ashamed to say that I have not opened any of them, and I don't suppose I ever shall. This historical stuff isn't my business : I should lose myself."

"I think I'll start on the novels. May I take two or three ?"

"I'll put the whole lot in my car when it takes you home, and tell my secretary to write and tell the author that I have carried out his request, and that my leading lady is much interested in them."

"I think I'll go home now, and begin them, if you will order the car."

He blew down the tube and ordered it.

"And . . . Oliver . . ."

"What ?"

"When shall you be ready to start for Westernport ?"

"In five or six days' time. What are you in such a hurry about ?" A hope glimmered in his heart that she might be relenting. But her reply quenched it.

"I want to begin work, and you are going to teach me how to set about it when we are down there."

"Don't think me an ungracious brute for what I said just now."

She wished that he would be less ingratiating, but managed to get out: "I don't think you said anything dreadful."

"I did: I asked what you were in such a hurry about, and that's about as rude a thing as a man could say, when his fiancée came to fix the wedding-day."

He made her shudder again, but there was absolutely nothing in his words to which she could take objection. She could not let him know that gladness at her reprieve had prevented her noticing how it was given, so she said simply: "I understood that you were not quite ready, and were enquiring if I had any special reason for accelerating our departure."

He felt the snub. But the elation he felt at her coming to ask when they were to be married made him tread on air. "Well, to tell the honest truth, Mirry—I may call you Mirry, mayn't I?"

"Get on with the truth, Oliver. It's your statutory right to call me anything you like; you might even call me 'dear' in public without my having any reason to object, except that it might lead to detection."

"I thought you might not like it," he said humbly.

"We shan't quarrel about things like this," she said rather severely. "What is that honest truth you were talking about?"

"That I want to have a honeymoon free from business, and that there are certain things about the production of a big scenic play like this which take time, and I want to get them settled before I go."

"What sort of things?"

"Well, the weaving of special fabrics, which will be required for dresses, for one thing; these costume plays want a lot of gold and silver tissue. And the making of the proper arms and armour—the swell people still wore a lot of body armour in our Queen Mary's day. Those are only two things, and there are a lot of others."

His self-restraint in putting off thinking about his wedding-day until he had finished his business appealed to her more than anything he had done yet; she said, rather more graciously: "I should not dream of dragging you away

until you had settled all your open business. One time is just the same as another to me."

"*Honest Injun?*"

She rather liked the slang, too. "Yes, *honest Injun*. I only raised the question lest you should think that I was causing delays under the pretence of getting my house ready."

"Take just as long as you require. For my part, as I said, I should like another five or six days to settle the things which I have to settle myself, so that I can take a complete holiday. After that," he added, forgetting her cautions, "I am going to have the happiest time in my life."

There was something so genuine about the way in which he said this that Mirabel felt a brute for not being able to reciprocate. But she could not pretend that she was looking forward to marrying him. Though she tried to be as decent to him as she could, she hated it. How could it be otherwise, when, at the very threshold of her womanhood, holding the ideas which she held on the subject, she was forced into marriage with a man for whom she had no desire, and who in common notoriety had entered into one affair after another, with the fast beauties of his theatre, and who, as far as she knew, did not possess a single taste in common with her, except a liking for open-air pursuits?

She was marrying him because marriage with him meant beginning her career on a platform of fame, and the chance, after a month of marriage, of devoting the rest of her life to her Art—she to whom marriage had always seemed the chief end of life!

For his wealth she did not care. She had a pittance of her own, sufficient to keep her from want. And her success in getting such an offer from him showed that she was not likely to lack employment in musical comedy.

But she had made her choice after deliberate reflection, and she did not minimize her good fortune in having such a choice in her power. That there was hardly a woman engaged in musical comedy who would have hesitated she knew. But she was marrying for gain and fame only—she could not deny it—and she was not giving her heart for it, but only her pound of flesh.

She felt so ashamed of herself, that she was seized with a fit of remorse at keeping him. She jumped up, saying: "I mustn't keep you any more: I know how busy you are.

Let me know what day suits you. It's all the same to me"—which was an odd way of being gracious about one's wedding-day. And though she was his fiancée, he could see that she did not mean him to have a kiss.

He rose, too, but he spoke down the tube as he did so.
"Is the car there?" he enquired.

"Yes, sir."

He showed her out, not by the secretary's room, through which she had entered, but through the hall of his flat. His private lift was up and ready for them. He accompanied her down to the street door, and just as he was about to say good-bye, discovered that they had forgotten the books. He blew up the speaking-tube to his valet to bring them down on a tray, while he stole another few minutes' conversation with the beloved. The valet brought them down all too soon and put them in the car.

"Carry them in for Miss Douglas when you get to the studios, Jennings," said Gray to the chauffeur, and then turned to Mirabel, who was waiting to say good-bye to him with a little more cordiality because he was so considerate in small things.

It struck her how honestly he shook hands!

CHAPTER VI

JOURNEYS END IN LOVERS' GREETING

MIRABEL was married at the Chelsea Town Hall Registry Office at ten o'clock in the morning. It was a mockery, which she could not stand, to have such a marriage in a church. Only representatives from their lawyers were present.

At the registry office and on the journey Mirabel was pleasant and polite, not more; and his heart sank a little at the barrenness which confronted him on the threshold of his married life. For one thing, she insisted that he should register as John Gray at the hotel, and have all his correspondence forwarded to him under cover, addressed to John Gray, so as to escape recognition.

"I shall call you Jack," she said, "and you had better

call me Isabel, my own name, which I never use, if you want to call me anything before people."

At Westernport he told the porter to put their luggage in a taxi—he had not brought his valet because he did not wish any witness of his matrimonial adventure—and ordered the chauffeur to drive to the *King Arthur*, the *Duke of Cornwall*, and the *Bungalow*, to see where they would get the rooms which they liked best.

They had only driven about a minute when they came to the *Bungalow*, a small hotel on the sea front at the corner of the road to the Lizard. It was built in the eastern style, with verandahs a dozen feet broad running round the east and west and south sides, and its southern face was only divided from the sea by the road. It had a garden on the west side, shut off from the road by a thick hedge of tamarisks, and planted with hardy palms and other sub-tropical shrubs.

"If we can get rooms on the front, I want to go to that hotel!" she said.

"Very well—we needn't take our meals there if the food is not good enough for you."

"It's sure to be good enough for me," she said. "I did not come to Westernport for meals."

"No more did I," said Gray, though he was fastidious about his eating, and wondered what their cellar would be like.

October comes between the seasons at Westernport, so they were able to get the grand suite on the ground floor in the south-west corner, which had steps leading down into the garden, and a verandah raised a few feet above the road. The steps led down to a palm walk, which ran the whole length of the garden behind the tamarisks. That palm walk was reproduced on postcards, which were circulated in thousands by the Cornish Riviera Association.

The taxi was dismissed; they were installed in their rooms; tea was ordered; at last they were alone.

He wondered in what spirit Mirabel would face the marriage to which she had so reluctantly yielded. Would she merely be cordial to him before servants and strangers—in fact, when cordiality took him no further—and at the best be passive to his advances? or would she not even go so far as that, but be a dignified and indignant slave?

That he would have to pay in some way for forcing her

to marry him against her will he felt certain. It was only human nature in such a proud, high-spirited woman.

One thing was clear to him, that anything which he might suffer, he had deserved, and that therefore he must meet her mute protests with indomitable good-nature. That they would be anything more than mute he did not believe. Mirabel was too much a lady for that. He did not even imagine that they would be intentional. It was her remorse which he feared.

She had taken off her hat to cool her head, for it was a very hot day ; she was looking wistfully over the bay, where the water was high, and as smooth as glass.

His misgivings were fulfilled, it seemed. But he went up to her, and put his arm round her gently, and said, "It is jolly, isn't it, being right over the sea ? "

To his surprise and rapture, she drew closer, and turning her face up to his with the lovely coquettices of her mother's nation, said, "For this month, Jack, I am yours—absolutely yours—for this whole month. If you will let me be alone for an hour or two each day, I shall have no will but yours, and I will try to be as nice to you as ever I can."

He clasped her to him to kiss her—the first kiss he had ever had. She returned his kisses affectionately. There was no trace of detachment.

When he had satisfied his wild hunger for his beautiful wife's kisses, he asked : "Why were you looking so pensive, Mirry, when I came up to you ? "

"It was only homesickness for Italy," she said. "The still water coming right up to the long sea-wall, the blocking out of the entrance of the bay by the island, and the southern vegetation of the garden, make the whole place look like some unfamiliar reach of our lake. I haven't felt so happy or so miserable since I came to England."

"I hope it is not I that is making you miserable ? "

"No, indeed, Jack. I need affection badly to exorcise my thoughts, and make me enjoy this lovely day, this lovely view, this English Italy ! "

He looked down into her face : her lips were quivering, and there were tears in her eyes. He kissed the quiver away, and she smiled.

"I must go into our room," she said, "and dry my eyes where I shan't be caught doing it by the waiter who is

bringing our tea. If he sees these idle tears, he'll think that we're not friends."

He finished the quotation when she had left the room "*Tears from the depth of some divine despair*—poor little girl! What a brute I've been to make her marry me! But could any man help it?"

She was only absent for a minute, and when she came back she found him standing where she had left him, gazing out at "Mirabel's lake." She heard the waiter's step outside the door and laid her hand on her husband's arm affectionately, to draw his attention to the creepers which almost dipped into the water on the low, red sandstone cliffs, just west of them.

The waiter gave his honeymoon smirk, and said, "The tea, ma'am."

She thanked him, and he withdrew. She saw that her husband had no suspicion of the pose. This was the first piece of acting which Mirabel Douglas did in the service of Oliver Gray.

"Jack, dear, can't I ring and make the waiter put the tea out on the verandah?—it's as mild as midsummer."

He was disappointed. He had pictured a lovers' tea, and the verandah was in full view of the passers-by, but he saw how the southernness of that verandah appealed to her, and went and rang the bell. The expression her face wore before the waiter rewarded him, though it was the result of conscious effort. Except during the hours of solitude for which she had bargained, she was not going to forget for one minute that this month was his.

Her eyes dwelt with genuine happiness on the scene, as they sat on the verandah, for the sea wall above that lake-like expanse might have been in their village on Lake Como, if it had been studded with a row of classical gardens, with broad flights of steps dipping down to the water. The illusion was made almost perfect by the rare autumn sunset tinging the motionless mirror of the water.

Oliver Gray made a mental note that her homesickness was his wife's human side, as he would have made a note at a rehearsal, and after all, tea on the verandah had its compensations. If you have a beautiful wife and you are not certain that you have not alienated her, it is comforting that passers-by should see her smiling gratefully.

"Should you like to take a spin in the car to see the lions of Westernport, Isabel?" he asked, as the waiter was clearing away the tea.

"Anything you like, dear—it's all lovely to me!"

"Order the car to come round, waiter."

"Did you send your car down here, Jack?"

"How could I? It would have told Jennings our secret."

Night had fallen before they returned from a marvellous drive round the English Nice and its environs, built in a wood on five miles of rocky coast deeply indented with gorges. The villas above the town and the country houses round it were all buried in gardens broken by fantastic masses of rock, and the roads hewn out between them had their stony walls curtained with creepers. The town itself was a mere crescent between the wooded cliffs and the river mouth.

Nature has given Westernport the rocks and foliage of the south, man has added climbing stairways, and climate the *dolce far niente*. Mirabel would have liked to abandon herself to memories, but she owed it to Oliver Gray to be grateful to him for letting her know that there was always a land of make-believe for her half a day's journey from London. So she let herself go, and said, "Oh, Jack, I have enjoyed myself this afternoon! It was ripping of you to bring me to Westernport for our honeymoon!"

She did not ask why he did it: he did not tell her that it was because he thought that no other theatrical person would be so foolish as to go there. His one sane reason was that he thought the sun a good adjunct for loafing. It was quite sufficient for him that she applauded his choice. It was a good beginning.

CHAPTER VII

MAKING ACQUAINTANCE

"DON'T let's put on evening dress, Jack, dear," she said, coaxingly.

"I don't think there is any necessity for you to do so, if you feel tired. I must change into a dinner jacket, at any rate—I shouldn't feel comfortable without it."

"It isn't that I'm tired, Jack. I'm not going to deceive you by pretending that I am. But it seems so futile to have on a dress in which it isn't easy to walk on a night like this, with the air warmer than June, and the moon flooding the bay."

"Well, I don't mind walking twenty miles in dress clothes, but if you feel more comfortable in a morning skirt, it will be quite enough if you change into an evening blouse. Or don't change at all, dear—I really don't care a bit, and I won't change myself if you don't want me to."

"Truly, I'd like you to. You wouldn't look yourself without it, and a man doesn't have to wear trousers trailing a foot on the ground because he is in evening dress."

This was one of the straws which show the direction of an idle breeze. If Mirabel had been in love with her husband, it would not have been a question of which skirt was most convenient to walk in when they went for a stroll after dinner on their wedding-night. She would have arrayed herself in her most beautiful and becoming and voluptuous evening dress, and as she had no maid, would have sent for a hairdresser to make the most of her glorious black hair, with the object of creating a picture which he would never forget, and making him the richest present of loveliness in her power.

She would have dressed as a matter of course if they had been dining in the public room, but she had expressed a wish to dine in their own suite, with the French windows, which led on to the balcony outside, open, and the table right in the window, to enjoy the beauty of the Indian summer night, and the full moon playing on the retreating waters, and to have their coffee in the garden.

It made a romantic setting for their wedding night. He acknowledged this, and had no suspicion that it was all part of her make-believe of Italy, all to bring back the past, which stood like the angel with the flaming sword between him and his Eden.

But though the vision of the moonlit sea, and the tiny waves unfolding themselves on the sand, were a reflex of the Adriatic shores, she did not let her dreams recoil on him. It was their wedding night, and it was his right to have her tender and smiling and hanging on his words. She set her-

self to respond to every whim of his mood, as if she were trying to win his love, instead of looking for an escape.

When they had finished their coffee under the palm trees of the garden, she said, "We'll go for our walk now, won't we? I'll run in and get my lace scarf."

It was some minutes before she rejoined him, because she could not remember where she had packed it. When at last she found it, and went out, he said, "Would you be awfully disappointed if we stayed at home?"

"Why? Do you want to stay at home?"

"I would rather like to sit in our rooms, so as to have every minute of you to myself."

"Of course we will, dear, it's all the same to me. I only want to do what you wish."

"Well, that's what I should like best, if you are sure that you don't mind."

"Can we sit without lights, looking out into the night? From a child I have loved looking at the water in the darkness; I used to do it every night from our terrace over the lake."

"There is nothing I should like better," he said.

It was exquisite, looking out on the bay, with the island fort which closed the entrance faintly picked out by the moonlight, and the wash of the receding tide on the glittering sands hardly more than a whisper. At first her thoughts flew back regretfully to the vision of the lake, while her husband was raining caresses and caressing words on the beautiful face beside him. Then gradually the woman in her awoke, and she responded with all the adorable womanliness of Italy.

* * * * *

They sat on till they heard the strokes of ten. Then he said: "Shall we go out for a breath of sea air now, Mirry, before we turn in? It seems a pity not to, when you kept on that dress on purpose!"

"I'd love to. You can't think what it means to me getting back to great spaces of water, which have been mine always till this last year, but which I have not once had since I came to England!"

"Well, come along then, dear. Will that scarf be enough?"

"Quite : I never wrap up."

"Where shall we go ?"

"To the very end of the harbour wall. We can get at it from the pier, the waiter says."

"Would you like the car to take us to the pier ?"

"Of course not—I want a walk. Besides, there's the tram."

"I don't think I have ever been in a tram," he said.

"Then, my dear Jack, you'll have to reform. I can't stand un-simple people."

She stepped out briskly.

"Why are you flying along ?"

"I was afraid you had suggested the car because you thought it was rather late."

"No, I didn't, but . . ."

"Tell me the truth, dear," she said maliciously.

"Well, Tara . . ."

"Yes . . . Tara . . . ?"

". . . It would have spoilt her walk if she couldn't have the car out to take her part of the way and wait for her."

"So you thought that you would not be doing me well ?"

"That's about it."

"You've a lot to learn about me. But I think we will step it out till we get to our point ; I like exercise."

He put down a sixpence at the pier, which bore the inscription : *Admission 2d.* He was just going to tell the man to keep the change, when he caught the look in her eye which said "Swank !"

He laughed, and picked the twopence up, and slipped his arm through hers and rushed her along the pier for a little way as a boy would have done. These two were almost strangers to each other. They had never met like fiancés, and, in point of fact, had seldom met at all after they had made that strange contract of marriage, because she resented the marriage so much. She did not know whether to feel offended or pleased by this trifling piece of horse-play. But she was his wife, and, having a nice disposition, she determined to be pleased by it, and made laughing expostulations.

He let her go before they reached the steps which lead down to the harbour wall, and as the light of the big lamp fell on her face, flushed by the romping, he stopped to stare at her, she looked so beautiful.

"What's the matter, Jack?"

"I think you're the most beautiful woman I ever saw."

He confessed it almost shamefacedly.

She did not feel as she ought to have felt at receiving such a compliment from her husband, especially as he was one of the most critical connoisseurs of a woman's looks to be found in all London. But the impression left uppermost in her mind was not what he had said, but his profession of chief purveyor of beauty to London audiences. She had a horrid feeling that he was appraising her. But she was determined not to forget that it was his wedding-day, and the vows she had made for the month of honey; so with the lovely Italian laugh, which is the most alluring grace of the daughters of Eve, she said: "Don't be absurd, dear! I know I'm pretty, but 'nothing to shout about.'"

For reply he put his arm round her and drew her to him; there was not another human being on that interminable harbour wall.

She submitted with good grace, and when he released her, took his arm affectionately to pursue their way. Before they reached the little lighthouse at the end, she stopped more than once to look now at the moonlit waters of the bay, now at bold hills with all their lights shining out from their masses of dark trees. The scene reminded her of Portofino more than ever. Here, at any rate, she could live in the past—a most unnatural state of mind for a lovely girl of twenty-two.

He was gratified by its beauty, too; but he was thinking that, beautiful as it was, it would be hardly possible to reproduce its effects on the stage with any success, till his eye fell on a rakish white steam-yacht which was lying just outside the harbour, waiting to come in when the tide served.

"Nice, isn't she? Do you want us to have a yacht, Mirabel? We can if you like."

She did not know if this was intended as a feeler. If they were only going to be *us* for a month, it was hardly a matter for consulting her. But if it was merely the generous impulse of one who wished to give her anything that would please her, it was different.

She shook her head. "There are lots of things I want more than a yacht," she replied.

"If we were only at home," he said, and he was speaking

quite literally, "I'd have Coxey in and make a list of them. But write down any you remember some time to-morrow, and they shall be attended to."

She smiled indulgently to hide her feelings, and then, recognizing the genuine generosity which lay behind his words, said, "I suppose you're wanting to get back now?" She judged that he would have had as much time as he needed for taking in the aesthetics of the night.

"Well, I think we might as well, if you've had as much as you want of it, old girl."

"I don't think we'd better wait for that. I could sit here all night."

"Then we'll get a move on," he said, slipping his arm round her, to which she submitted graciously.

CHAPTER VIII

MIRABEL SEES "THE BOOK" OF "MARY, QUEEN OF SCOTS"

THREE days had passed, and Oliver Gray was not very satisfied with his progress.

In the mere matter of tenderness Mirabel was all that could be desired. She was like wax in his hands for that, and she was ready to yield implicitly to his will in every matter, great and small. This she considered was part of her bargain, part of his pound of flesh. For one month she meant to be his very own, and to leave not a stone unturned to please him, except changing the terms of their contract or her views of it.

She did not allow this reservation to affect her manner to him. She was as affectionate as any wife need be, if no attempt was made to lift the veil which hung over the thirty-first day. She had herself suggested that thirty-one days should be counted to the month. And it was not merely passive affection. All day long she was thinking how she could please her husband, and let him have the full value of the sacrifice. She consulted him about everything she wore. She was willing to share every occupation and amusement to which he inclined. She offered to write his letters for him—the few he could not escape. He seldom did more than sign a letter in London; she knew that telegrams took the place of autograph letters with him. And what pleased

him most of all was that she took care that others should see how she looked to his lead in everything.

The very day after their arrival Mirabel had coaxed her husband into telling her all about his plans for Mary, Queen of Scots, and giving her "the book" to look at. She had read all the Mary Stuart books which he had lent her in London; she wished to form her own plain conception of the character before she learned how it had been adapted to musical comedy.

One of the strange stipulations which she had made about their marriage was that she should have two hours to herself every day for rest—demanded just as a secretary might demand hours of rest, except that to save her husband's face she had made Lewis and Lewis add the words: "For reading, etc."

She had not taken the two hours on their wedding-day, naturally, but on the second day she took them after lunch, when it is no hardship for a man to sleep, and carried off the play to the glass shelter. She had wondered how any human being, even if he had the whimsical brain and practised hand of an Adrian Ross, could turn the tragical story of Mary, Queen of Scots, into a musical comedy, but it had been done as easily and naturally as possible. Divining that the public would only care about the name, and would ask very little history to justify it, and would be best pleased with rollicking fun and glorious pageants, the whole duration of the play was laid between the return of Mary, the widow of Francis II. of France, to her own kingdom in 1561, and her marriage to the Earl of Darnley in 1565, which was the climax of the play. The intrigues which led up to the marriage of the beautiful young widowed Queen supplied the fun and the incidents, while Holyrood and Edinburgh Castle and the splendour of the Scottish nobility, some of whom were almost as regal in their followings as their mistress, gave every opportunity for pageantry. All the chief actors in Mary's tragic history were brought into the play without much regard to date—the Earl of Darnley and the Earl of Bothwell, the Earl of Moray and the Earl of Morton, the chief Douglas of his day, the Earl of Huntly and Lord Seton, John Knox and David Rizzio, jostled each other; and Rizzio, as a convenient musical person, was made a serious rival to Darnley, by the Queen's being secretly engaged to him, when her

courtiers' intrigues compelled her to marry Darnley. It made a very effective musical comedy; it had almost the charm of "*The Merry Widow*."

The odd thing, considering the extraordinary position in which Mirabel found herself, was that the part given her to play was the part of a woman who is forced into a marriage which she dislikes, having to smile and make a brave show before the public. As Gray's wife she was in a way the queen of all the puppet lords and ladies who were to crowd the stage of the *Babylon Theatre* in the great historico-musical comedy.

It was true that she had no Rizzio in her life like she had in the play, no engagement which she had been forced to abandon in order to marry Gray. But the author of the play had made a good deal of her historical aversion to Darnley, in order to give Rizzio a romantic song.

The play interested her far more than she had expected, and she was bubbling over with eagerness for Gray to begin coaching her in her part when she got back to tea. She was so animated and so affectionate that he might well have been rejoiced that he had given in about the two hours' absence every day. But no man can be deeply in love without paying for it in anxiety, and he took her eagerness over the play to be a perpetual reminder that the real link between them was that of manager and leading lady, not of husband and wife. Besides, he was conscious that personal contact had done nothing to fuse the barrier of steel which she had established between them, as he had expected that it would. Only that thin fence lay between him and the promised land, but the gates were barred, and there was not the smallest chink in it. Heaven was as far from him as ever.

CHAPTER IX

MIRABEL LEARNS HER PART

THE month at Westernport had wild-ducks' wings for both of them—for him because he had never been so much in love before, for her partly because Westernport was more like the luscious South than any place she had visited in England, and partly because she was so interested in being trained.

Without doubt Oliver could coach an actress in musical comedy as no one else could. And the reason was not far to seek. Just as a golfer who has learned golf as a boy achieves a grasp of the game which no one who learns it later in life can ever attain, so Oliver Gray, Junior, who had watched the plays at the *Babylon* from the stage-box ever since he wore sailor suits, could detect and remember the treatment which every detail required. He was more at home in the theatre than he was in his flat.

Added to this, he was extremely good-humoured and extremely patient, and enjoyed teaching a stupid actress as much as a subaltern enjoys teaching a stupid puppy. Of course he enjoyed teaching the good-looking ones best, but he also thoroughly enjoyed teaching the woman-comedian whose principal asset was her ugliness, and who was to be the Queen's foster-mother in the play.

Now for the first time he had an ideal subject. For he was training the woman who was the love of his life, and she was willing, and intelligent, and suited to her part.

Tara, whom he had loved very passionately for a while, was stupid and indolent; other pretty women had been only stupid or indolent, not both; and others, who were not pretty, had tried to make up for it by being clever and industrious.

Mirabel, in addition to her other admirable qualities, had an engaging humility about her acting, and wanted to work all day. For now that she had got the part for which she had longed so much and given so much, she was haunted by a dread that she would not be equal to it, because she had so much technical knowledge to acquire in the time.

Gray was anxious that she should work hard, because he had built great hopes on her success; and it did not spoil his honeymoon, because, while they were working, they were always alone, and it was natural to touch her to mould her to his thoughts.

She was charmingly amenable to his moulding, and at first ready, and afterwards anxious, to receive the caress which told her that she had achieved the lesson. For she recognized that while he was trying to make her do anything or understand anything in the play, he was a professional, jealous of his art. It was only when she had succeeded that she was his wife, to be petted and congratulated. And if she was mal-

adroit, he was unsparing in his criticisms, however kindly in his manner.

But he would not let her work *too* hard. He was jealous for her health and her beauty, and knew how arduous rehearsing is, especially when the work is intensified by your having to learn the rudiments of your art, as well as the business of your play.

To create an atmosphere for one who was not yet accustomed to the stage, in the five days which elapsed between her calling on him at the theatre and their departure for Westernport, he had made his chief costumier copy for her the dress and head-dress worn by Queen Mary in the famous Hampton Court portrait, and she wore this as a dinner-dress when they dined in their rooms and were going to rehearse her part afterwards. The pearls which shone in her black hair were real—a costly wedding-present.

She learned her business as an actress and a man's chosen companion by day, her part as Mary, Queen of Scots, in the evening.

As soon as he saw her made up for it, with Mary's black velvet dress accentuating the alabaster whiteness of her face, and making the wonderful Sicilian eyes shine like stars, he knew that if he could teach her to act at all, she must succeed, because she looked so royal and romantic. He sometimes felt as if he had married a phantom Queen, when he saw her in costume, and inspired by rehearsing, and compared her with the reproductions of Mary Stuart portraits which he had bought for her to study.

To any of the ninety-nine women the appeal of this honest transfiguration of the beloved would have been overwhelming ; it would have swept her off her feet. But Mirabel was the hundredth woman. Instead of converting her, it created a separate her, who belonged to the theatre and Oliver Gray, and to whom her soul passed temporarily, leaving her real self dormant in her home. It accentuated the unreality in their relations. It made her whole stay with him at Westernport a phase, a play in which she had a part.

And this was in fair-weather days, when a charming cavalier was overwhelming a raw girl with chivalrous kindness, and she was having her first taste of the wealth which never has to consider cost, while the gifts of Mephistopheles seemed inexhaustible, and his purposes obscure. But what would

happen, when the reminders came of the price which had to be paid?

This was what she thought of during the hour or two every day which she had reserved for herself, when she took the car to the wild scenery near the Devil's Wish-bone, to stand upon the windy heights, or scramble down the perilous path to where the fangs of the reefs below seemed for ever snarling at an angry sea.

There the presence of great waters flung her back on her real self, and she wondered what would happen when she met the ideal man of her dreams.

For Oliver, though he matched the figure in her dreams, certainly was not that. He was a splendid Englishman, courageous, kind, and physically a noble specimen of the race; but he was of sport—sporty; of the theatre—theatrical; of all the things which her Italy stood for, nothing but passion touched him. The beautiful epicurean existence of which she had dreamed, the striving to live a perfect married life under perfect conditions, indulging the mind and not the body with the best which the world can give—this was beyond his ken.

She might, she acknowledged, have met a man who had not the aspirations which she desired, and whose personality was yet so overwhelmingly attractive to her that she would have been content to marry him with but little hope of winning him to her ideals. Oliver Gray was not that man, and, good and kind and considerate as he was proving himself to her, she felt no nearer forgiving him for having made her his slave by forcing her to marry him. For it cut her off from the liberty of achieving the ideal which she had cherished from childhood—the reward for the lonely years she had spent in that Lombard Eden, which to her mind was always the setting of her dream.

And it was in England, too, that she was married, where marriage could only be dissolved by sin.

Oliver Gray had done her an intolerable wrong, and, if she fulfilled her promise of being as good and affectionate a wife as she possibly could be during the month, for which she was to live with him as his wife, she would have paid the price for the fame and wealth and power which Mephistopheles had offered her in exchange for her soul.

And she would be better than her bond, too, for—purposely

or not—nothing had been stipulated regarding her behaviour when their married life was over ; there were no pains and penalties to fall on her if she lived the life which other beauties of the *Babylon* were living all round her, to console herself for a hated marriage.

Oliver Gray may have had his own generous motives in saying nothing about it. But it would not injure him, for Mirabel came of a family whose *noblesse oblige* was historical, long before Catherine Barlass gave its exemplar to the proverb “ As loyal as a Douglas ” in trying to save the life of her King by putting her arm through the staples of a door whose bolt had been stolen. If Mirabel did not mean to live with her husband, she meant to live up to the proverb. Which implied much, since a Douglas might have worn the Crown of Scotland, if the family had not been so loyal. She must live up to the tradition ; she must do nothing common or unclean, because she knew that, though no one might ever have heard of her, the Douglas blood ran pure in her veins.

CHAPTER X

AT REHEARSAL

LONDON theatre-goers were electrified when they saw among the theatrical advertisements of the daily papers, Oliver Gray's announcement that the next production at the *Babylon Theatre* would be “ Mary, Queen of Scots,” a historico-musical comedy, and that the part of the Queen would be played by Miss Mirabel Douglas, a girl who had never appeared on the stage before.

The older people, and more responsible papers, spoke with considerable asperity of his farcing the romantic story of the ill-fated Queen. But since all his productions had been uniformly paradoxical and successful, his patrons looked forward to a fresh triumph.

Concerning the leading lady, the critics, who were never allowed at *Babylon* rehearsals, could learn nothing from the Company beyond the fact that she fulfilled the beauty traditions of the theatre, and had a wonderful voice.

The Company of the *Babylon Theatre* were themselves frankly mystified by the leading-lady. She was beautiful ;

she had never had a part before ; she called the proprietor Oliver, and had had a grand dressing-room built for her ; yet she kept him more at his distance than any woman in the theatre. The proprietor's secretary said that he really knew nothing about her, except that she was a woman with high connections (a gratuitous assumption), who had made very special conditions with Mr. Gray. He imagined that the last leading lady's dressing-room was not considered good enough for her.

They had been rehearsing for a month without any of the Company having any complaint against her. Whatever her birth might have been, she was treated exactly like the rest in every respect, except that the new dressing-room allowed her to enter and leave the theatre by a private entrance, and that she interposed a barrier between herself and familiarities. Even Oliver Gray—whose attentions, since he was the sole proprietor of the theatre, and a very handsome and dashing man, on the right side of thirty, were welcomed by most of the girls—never took the smallest liberty with her, beyond addressing her by her Christian name, which was only fair, as she called him Oliver.

Nor had they anything to complain of in her stage tactics. Unlike most leading ladies, she seemed to have no desire to monopolize the stage and the limelight and the best business. She, of course, took the part of the Queen, and behaved like a real Queen, except when the incongruities of musical comedy compelled her to sing the best songs in the piece, irrespective of appropriateness. She had no dancing to do, except at a sort of Royal servants' ball, which was dragged into the play so that the public might be treated to the kind of dancing which it wanted, without compelling the Regent and Darnley and the Queen's Maries—in fact, anyone but Morton—to dance anything less dignified than Court dances.

The general opinion of the Company was that her voice and her looks were all right ; that she was chosen for them only, because Oliver Gray wanted to have a fresh star for the public ; that she had made so little of her part in the acting that unless Oliver Gray had been infatuated, he would have been bitterly disappointed ; also that the public would be disappointed because she was put before other beauties in the Company, who would have made a “speciality” of the part.

CHAPTER XI

THE FIRST NIGHT OF "MARY, QUEEN OF SCOTS"

THE great night had come which was to put to the test Mirabel Douglas's capacity to take advantage of the opportunity for which she had sacrificed so much.

Every seat in the house was crowded. It was a *Babylon* first night—not only for a new piece of a particularly novel character, but a new leading lady, and everyone knew what was expected in looks of a leading lady at the *Babylon*.

The play made not the mildest attempt to fall in with history. The first act presented the grand state entry of Mary into Edinburgh, which never occurred. The background gave a magnificent view of Old Edinburgh, culminating in the castle; the foreground was an open space with citizens—the popular comedians of the Company, providing their usual bill of fare under a thin veneer of mediæval Scotland.

When they had done enough of this to satisfy their patrons, there was a blare of trumpets, and a splendid procession appeared, consisting of the chief Scottish nobles of the time, heading bands of their retainers, with splendid armour and banners—a truly magnificent pageant, followed by the Queen, supposed to be a lovely girl of nineteen, widow of the King of France, seated on a white palfrey. As she raised her eyes to acknowledge the burst of cheering which greeted her *entrée*, the audience realized what a lovely woman the actress who played the Queen was, with her perfect features, her white skin, her glowing eyes, and her jet-black hair, and when she dismounted, for no reason whatever, to sing a song, she presented a figure of queenly elegance.

When she sang, she swept the audience right off their feet, for she had a glorious voice, and had inherited from her Italian mother a soft alluring grace, and the light laughter which is as intoxicating as a caress.

Like a true Italian, she gathered the whole audience into her net. She was encored three times. When the song was finished, a throne was handy, on which she seated herself, surrounded by her glittering nobles, to receive the homage

of various people, less important than the nobles in Scottish history, but much more important as members of the *Babylon* Company, who soon relapsed into their ordinary comic business.

The important comedians reappeared on some excuse or other in the second act, laid in the interior of Holyrood, and the third act, laid in the interior of Edinburgh Castle.

The second act was given up, when the stage was not needed by the comedians, to the courting of the Queen by the poet Chastelard, who received the indulgence extended to troubadours. The reason was not far to seek: being a troubadour, it was natural for him to sing love-duets with his Royal mistress. He was a baritone to show that he was not to be the successful lover—a magnificent baritone, but an offensive fop of an actor. This was perhaps intentional, in order to make the audience dislike him duly.

John Knox was usually present to spoil any chance he might have had. It was not necessary. Mirabel's queenly impatience of his presumption was a fine sustained piece of acting. But whenever she had crushed him in the duet-duel, she always had to spoil the effect by turning round and lavishing her smiles on a tempestuous audience.

The great nobles of the Court, like the Queen's half-brother, the Regent, were as stinted in their opportunities of distinguishing themselves as the comedians were over-indulged, except the Earl of Morton, whose duty it was to imitate the popular actor of that name who has achieved such a success in *revues*, and not to pourtray the leading Douglas of the time.

Half-way through the act Darnley arrived from England, and at once sang a tenor song to indicate that it was his marriage which had been made in heaven. Some use was found for the courtiers in giving him a proper reception. And Mirabel showed charming dignity and graciousness in receiving him.

The third act, laid in the large hall of the castle, was taken up at intervals with the courtship and duets of the Queen and Darnley, with a dash of Rizzio thrown in. The comedians carried on the really essential business of the play. The Queen's Maries usually went wherever she went, and danced. In the third act she danced, too, with Darnley, as a form of betrothal. The other important characters,

except Knox, came in handy for dancing with the Maries. Knox's efforts to stop these innocent gaieties almost threw him into the ranks of the comedians. The parts of the Maries were taken by four out of the five lovely women who played the parts of the Society ladies in the ordinary *Babylon* pieces. Some of the comedians had courtships with beautiful maidens simmering all through the piece, and these resulted in betrothals at the same time as the Queen became betrothed to Darnley.

Hughie Sprot, for instance, as the Lord Provost who manufactured whisky and soda-water, loved Topsy Perks, the soubrette who took the part of Queen Mary's maid, Elsie Ridpath, and when he was bowing himself out of the Royal Presence, used, as he got to the door, to bring the house down by calling out : " Ta-ta, Els' ! "

The crowning *bêtise* of the author was when he made John Knox join the hands of Mary and Darnley, the match which the real Knox so bitterly opposed, because Darnley was a Catholic. The audience did not know this, or, at all events, did not mind. They would have cheered Knox for letting bygones be bygones, if this kind of interruption had been usual.

The great nobles were quite forgotten at the finish, perhaps because they were already married, and marrying was the business of this scene.

Mirabel made the scene. It was plain from the beginning that she resented Darnley's suit, and had given her heart to the courtly Italian singer, Rizzio, who was in attendance on her all through the play. But it was plain also that this part was to come to nothing, since it had not been entrusted to the principal tenor, and sorely against her will she had to consent to marry Darnley, after they had sung two songs to each other.

She ran through the whole gamut of love's battle with charming grace and sincerity, and always looked a Queen.

Bothwell, too, was present, looking daggers at Darnley. Huntly and Seton were merely supers at the Royal wedding, with which the play concluded.

The play had an immense reception. Its music was delightful ; its setting was more than usually magnificent ; and London had a new favourite to take to its heart, a lovely woman with a lovely voice.

Mirabel had to come forward three or four times. The last time Oliver Gray himself brought her on.

The critics, treading carefully, for Gray was a monster advertiser, went home to say that "Mary, Queen of Scots," was a genuine *Babylon* success, with plenty of fun, magnificent scenery and dresses, and bevies of beautiful women. They prophesied that the music would catch on like the music of "The Merry Widow."

The history they tore to pieces : critics have to tear something to pieces to be critics. Those who were friendliest congratulated Oliver Gray on having tried to avoid every semblance of history : which was a grave injustice, for he believed that he was giving the public something quite as historical as Tennyson's "Queen Mary." They were all agreed that the banalities of the production must be forgiven, as they had given the public such a Mary, Queen of Scots, as Miss Mirabel Douglas. They went home to rave over her voice, to rave over her beauty, her dignity, her grace, and the capabilities she must have as an actress, to have invested that part with any kind of cohesion or interest. With few exceptions they greeted her as one of the greatest accessions musical comedy had ever had.

She was, of course, the principal toast at the supper which Oliver Gray always gave on a first night to all of the company whose names appeared on the bill. Actors and actresses are very human people, and though they may fight with desperate jealousy against the success of a rival who is just forging ahead of them, they are ready to acclaim any success which they cannot hope to rival, and to range themselves under its banners. For if their leading lady or actor achieves a commanding success, their play may run so long that every man in the company may become a popular favourite, and every woman, in musical comedy, a countess.

Hughie Sprot, the chief comedian, who represented a character who does not come into history, and was proposing some other toast, crystallized this in an epigram, when he said : "There are some among us who resented the promotion over their heads of a bread-and-butter Miss to the post of leading lady, but their sentiments have experienced a sudden change since they perceived that the bread-and-butter Miss is going to be Miss Bread-and-Butter for us all."

The chorus of praise from the speeches and the conversa-

tion of the whole table was unstinted. It is nice to be able to congratulate your proprietor.

As Mirabel and Gray sat and smiled their thanks for the generous things which were said of them in every speech, one might have suspected them of being the happiest people in London—she because she had justified his expectations, and had the certainty of a career before her ; he, because he had found a new trump-card for his theatre, and, having made her fortune, might justly look forward to a delightful friendship. And this he might do without doubt, but, unfortunately, it only meant a fall from grace for him. And for her, too, there was a canker at the heart of the rose.

It took the new Queen fully an hour to say good-bye to all her Court, who were bubbling with champagne. They were much gratified by her staying with their host to the end.

When the last one had gone, she said : “ I am simply dead ! Will you have the car called, Oliver ? ”

It might have been an excuse to escape a situation she desired to avoid, had it not been so obviously true. She sat huddled up with tiredness until one servant came to say that the car was there, and another to bring the cloak she had sent for from her dressing-room. She was too tired to change back into the clothes in which she had come ; the car could fetch them and take back her costume in the morning. •

As she was stepping into the car, she took Gray's hand in a most eloquent grasp. “ Good night, Oliver,” she said. “ A thousand thanks for all your generosity and consideration. We can be the greatest friends in the world.”

He closed the door carefully, gave her a little nod, and said “ Home ” to the chauffeur, who had no idea who he was.

CHAPTER XII

HOME

AS Mirabel sped swiftly in her car along the Kensington High Street to the old house on the river-bank at Hammersmith, which she had insisted on making her home, she had food enough for thought. The luxurious car in which she was travelling was her own, and the old mansion

to which she was speeding was her own, and she was assured of plenty of money for their maintenance. And this very night she had made such an impression on the public that she might consider her triumph as a musical-comedy actress begun.

She had done it all herself, without an introduction from anyone, and she was but two-and-twenty. It read like a fairy-tale. Well might she lean back on the soft cushions and give little sighs of satisfaction.

But there was the proverbial fly in the ointment, and it was that she had sold her liberty for it—that the vision of the lake had faded out of her life.

The girls in the theatre had been telling her what a splendid marriage she ought to make, if she played her cards well. "There's no reason why you shouldn't be a countess," they said.

She knew better, and it seemed intolerable to her that now, when she was rich as well as beautiful, and should, more than most women, have had the chance of making that ideal marriage, she should be irrevocably cut off from it, though she owed her wealth to the fact.

At any rate, she had the consolation of success, artistic, in some measure, as well as popular, her instinct told her. And since she had abdicated the throne of marriage, she would be one more of the Exiles of Art.

She found both her man-servant and her Italian maid, Caterina, sitting up for her, as well as Paula Maitland, who not having been present at the supper, had arrived home two or three hours before her. Paula was quite worn out with their questions. Mirabel was overwhelmed with their congratulations from the moment that she set foot within the door. The servants, who had very easy places, naturally adored her.

Paula, of course, joined in the chorus, but reserved her real congratulations till she came into Mirabel's bedroom, carrying a *thermos*, the companion of many wanderings, now filled with steaming coffee.

Imperilling the life of the *thermos* by flinging it on the bed, she embraced Mirabel with the distinction which characterized everything she did, and cried from the bottom of her heart: "Oh, Mirabel, you are wonderful! I knew how gloriously you could sing, and I saw what a talent you had

for acting when you were the grandmother in that little piece they gave at the Conservatorium on the *gala* night ; but I had no idea that you would hold a whole theatre with your acting and sweep them right off their feet with your singing ! You have made your fortune in a single night ! London will never go back on you ! ”

“ Paula dear, you are saying far too much ! ” protested the blushing and delighted Mirabel. “ But I was a success, wasn’t I ? I know I was, because the other women in the company congratulated me so heartily, and John Knox told me at supper that they would never have acknowledged it, if it had been any good trying to deny it.”

“ Well, so you were, dear—the audience simply raved over you ! You’ll be hearing from the whole of the first four rows of the stalls ! ”

“ I shan’t ‘ hear,’ because I asked Mr. Gray to open every letter which was addressed to me at the theatre, and return it to the writer.”

“ That will be very humorous,” laughed Paula.

“ I don’t think that you can form any idea how humorous,” said Mirabel grimly.

Paula was looking her very best : she was so excited and enchanted with her friend’s success.

She was rather the antithesis of Mirabel. Both were of a good height, slender and graceful ; both held themselves charmingly ; but whereas Mirabel’s grace was of the willowy Italian type, so soft, though it was so upright, Paula’s caine of a very straight back, almost military in its distinction, and her distinction in dress was as marked. The slight figure had its counterpart in very well-chiselled, rather retroussés features, and her rosy complexion was set off by superb hair, full of natural curl and wave, which had gone snow-white when she was hardly older than Mirabel, and become more beautiful than it had ever been when it was golden.

But none of her friends ever analysed Paula’s face as it has been analysed here ; in her brilliant presence the play of the mobile features, and the whimsical smile which accompanied the sallies of her wit, focused their attention.

Paula was a well-known novelist, who had more than once made a long stay with Mirabel at the Villa Visconti, and, by a lucky coincidence, had become an inmate of Mirabel’s new house.

When Mirabel determined to reply to the advertisement for the post of leading lady at the *Babylon Theatre*, Addison Rhodes, the dramatic professor at the Royal Lyceum, who, like all his kind, was a preposterous optimist, had no doubt whatever that she would get the post, while she did not cherish the smallest hope.

And when she came back and said that she was one of the candidates who were selected to be tested, his elation mounted still higher, and distressed her. And when she came in one day, a week afterwards, and said that she had got the post, he almost sang a *Nunc Dimittis* over her, and could not understand her dismay. All she told him was: "I don't want to be leading lady at the *Babylon*—it's a hateful place! I wish I'd never applied for it!"

"You'll get accustomed to it, my dear. I know that there must be many things about it which a lady would hate, and you are . . ." here he gave his grand bow ". . . a great lady. But you will get over them. These people are very good-hearted, and, after all, you need not receive . . . addresses, shall we call them? . . . if you make up your mind that you will tolerate nothing of the sort."

"Oh, that is where it comes in!" she almost moaned.

She left the Lyceum immediately. She had paid the fees for the term, and that was where her responsibility to the institution ended. And in less than a month she had gone down into the country and buried herself until the rehearsals began. She left no hint with any of her classmates as to where she was going.

"Women are funny!" Professor Rhodes said to one of them. "You would have thought that a chance like this would have raised her to the seventh heaven! Instead of which, she goes on as if she was waiting to be executed! She should have thought of what musical comedy means before."

Mirabel intended to live, for the present, in an old house on the Mall at Hammersmith, which had taken her fancy, and before she went away she gave orders for it to be done up, and a few rooms furnished temporarily, so that she might have somewhere to go to when she came back for rehearsals.

The regular furnishing of the house was to be one of her amusements afterwards.

Her plans in this direction were, however, entirely changed by meeting one day at an art-furnisher's, where she was buying grey felt, Paula Maitland.

"Why, what are you doing here, Madonna Mirabel?"

"I've got a part in the new play at the *Babylon* for the autumn."

"And your father?"

"Dead." No cloud went over the face which had lighted up so at meeting her beloved Paula.

"And so you had to do something for your living?" hazarded Paula shyly, lest she should be treading on delicate ground.

"Well, hardly that—I have enough to live on. The stage had always been my dream; so when I was free I came to England to pursue it."

"I hope the part is a good one—I mean, financially?"

"Very," answered Mirabel, and to change the subject, said: "But you, Paula, what are you doing here, in this shop, ordering that enormous carpet? You must live in a palace!"

"It isn't for myself," laughed Paula, "but my books don't pay me very well—not well enough to allow me to travel in the wholesale way that I like—so I eke my income out by decorating and furnishing houses for those who have not the brains or the energy to do it for themselves."

"Do you mean that you do the decorating?"

"Not at all! I only advise and choose."

"Is your own house very lovely?"

"I haven't got a house—I live in rooms."

"What do you do with them when you go away—when you go away for months like you used to spend on Lago di Como?"

"Drag all my possessions into the sitting-room, which I keep because I have grown accustomed to working in it. Any room does to sleep in, and there's generally some room in the house which I can have when I come back from my wanderings, until my proper bedroom is vacant."

"What an uncomfortable existence for a woman like you!"

"It isn't really, because it allows me to travel, which is the delight of my life."

"And yet you have to put aside your writing and do drudgery like this to keep going?"

"There's no drudgery about it, Mirabel. There is an authorship in furnishing as well as in books. A house is just like a book—if its furnishing is going to be an artistic success, it must have a plot, and if the plot is a good one, everybody who comes into the house will make dialogue about it."

"That's all very well, but doesn't this kind of authorship make you feel rather sick sometimes, when you've furnished a house for somebody else, just as you would have liked it, down to the very door-mat?"

"Oh, my dear, yes! It's been my dream all my life to have a house of my own, to live in one of my creations! But I couldn't do it, because 'it would put the lid on' my travelling."

"I can tell you how to do it," said Mirabel. "Furnish my house for me, and come and live in it. It shan't cost you a penny. You can choose two rooms to put your own things in. There are plenty of them, and you can always go away when the spirit moves you, because even if I'm not there, there will be the servants to look after your things."

"And where do you come in?"

"Well, it will be lonely work for me living by myself, and as a girl of twenty-two, employed in musical comedy, I don't suppose that I shall be any the worse for a chaperon."

"I don't think you will. For one thing, Wilde was quite right when he said that the stage was the refuge of the too fascinating. And for another, at a theatre like the *Babylon*, the stage-door is even worse than the stage."

"There will be no stage-door for me. I'm going to have a private entrance, and am always going to be seen into my car by the manager."

"By Oliver Gray, Junior? That's worse!"

"No, by his assistant, old Mac."

"Acting under Gray's orders? What a set-a-thief proceeding! The whole business comes from not having the same laws for men as they have for women. Scotland Yard would interfere in one second if women hung about the stage-door, and bribed their way into the Green Room, for the very same purpose. So why should men be allowed to do it night after night? It's because they make the laws."

Mirabel had no opinion. In Italy, where there are no *Parties*, the aristocracy have no political influence, and

most of them take no interest in politics. Those who do, often rise in their Lower House as the heirs to Peerages rise in our House of Commons. Mirabel's own kinsman, the head of the Visconti-Venosta, had recently been Prime Minister of Italy, but the other Visconti had taken no interest in the fact, except when they wanted posts in the Civil Service.

Mirabel did not mention this to Paula ; she disliked politics, and did not wish to be supposed to have any connection with them. So she changed the subject, and said : "Are you a suffragette, Paula ? "

"Of course I am ! I don't break windows or march in the processions, because I think that it is vulgar to go to prison. I should hate being handcuffed with a whole lot of people looking on, which so many of these women seem to enjoy—I suppose on the principle of martyrdom. But I subscribe as much as I can afford to the funds of the W. S. P. U., and go to all their meetings, and speak up for them whenever the subject comes into ordinary conversation."

"Do you ever address meetings ? "

"No, I should be dumb if I tried."

"Thankful for that !" said Mirabel to herself. She was beginning to fear that she had made a mistake in asking Paula to share her home. She had visions of "Votes for Women" meetings in the big room in her house where the boats were.

"You won't bring the suffragette business to our house, will you, Paula ? " she said.

"Oh, no ; I'll be a perfect Jesuit about it ! "

The man who was attending on them had left them ; his commission as a salesman did not seem likely to be affected until this matter was settled. Mirabel's face had evidently betrayed her fears, for Paula's next remark was :

"Don't change your mind, dearest Mirabel, or I shall die of disappointment ! I am the loneliest woman in the world, and we two could be so happy together ! I won't be a worry about the W. S. P. U. Did you say Hammersmith ? "

"Yes."

"I am glad you did ; we can live there without any pretence."

"Have you done your business ? " asked Mirabel.

"Practically."

"Then let's run down there now."

Paula was delighted by the proposal, which appeared to clinch matters.

Outside the shop Mirabel hailed a taxi, and in a quarter of an hour they were at the gate of an old Georgian house, fronting on the river.

The gate, which had a hoop for holding a lantern above it, was dislocated, but a grand piece of Georgian ironwork. When Mirabel took a key from her pocket and opened the front door, there was a door open on their left, which revealed the studio. It was so large that there was a row of boats on the floor, which the local boat-builder had been allowed to house there. "This is a nice dining-room for two lone women," said Mirabel. But Paula, though she was staggered at the size of the house where they were going to live so quietly, noted it with satisfaction.

"That will do for our receptions . . . of course, we shall have receptions? You don't have to furnish a room for receptions. You only put down a drugget and bring in chairs and tables from other rooms."

All the chief rooms in the house were panelled; more than one bedroom had its powder-closet, and not the least joy was the garden of an acre or more, with all its old-fashioned conceits, though it was mournfully dilapidated.

"What couldn't you do with such a place if you had the money!" came almost with a groan from Paula.

"Don't distress yourself!" said Mirabel. "A relative of mine, who is much more pleased about my getting my post at the *Babylon* than I am, gave me the house, and he's going to pay for putting it in order and furnishing it."

"Why on earth is he going to do it? How did you get round him, Mirabel?"

"I didn't get round him. It's his own idea entirely. He wants me to cut a proper dash, I suppose. I can assure you that he was horribly disappointed when I chose a house at Hammersmith! His idea was somewhere in Mayfair or Belgravia. I only got out of it by saying that I must have the river, to remind of my lake. I should have felt suffocated there."

"He must be a very rich man," said Paula.

"He is, I believe."

"Well, my dear, that's a good thing to have behind you in your profession. People are not so apt to jump on you

if you have a powerful relative, as they are when you are a lone woman."

"Well, I'd just as soon do without him if I could," said Mirabel. "But I can see that it's a good thing to start in a dignified way."

* * * * * *

"Well, when shall we start decorating it and choosing the furniture?—if you really mean me to do it!" asked Paula, when they had gone in, and, woman-like, were sitting on the stairs of that noble Georgian mansion (because there was nothing else to sit on except the boats), and making tea with a spirit-lamp and a couple of enamelled iron teacups, which had made the journey there in a string bag.

"To-morrow, if you like, dear."

"And how much may I spend?"

"Anything you like, apparently. He's paid a thousand pounds into my bank to begin with, and says I can have as much more as I want."

"A thousand pounds!" gasped Paula. "Aren't you frightened, Mirabel, that all this gold is going to turn into dead leaves, as it did in the '*Tales of the Alhambra?*'"

"My dear, I am always dreaming of those dead leaves!" She looked so dejected that Paula cried:

"Cheer up! If the money is in the bank, it can't turn into dead leaves, because no gold has ever been taken there, but only a cheque with the proper kind of signature on it!"

"I know," said Mirabel, almost morosely. "The money is right enough, but there are hateful things connected with this musical comedy!"

Paula thought so, too, and was glad that Mirabel had proper ideas. She had been brought up in an ardently religious circle: she had been called Paula after the noble Paula of the Aventine, who was one of the chief establishers of Christianity in ancient Rome. Paula had travelled so much, that she had got out of the way of going to church, but she was still true to her prejudices.

"You must let me know all your ideas, so that I may carry them out as far as possible," she said, to furnish a distraction.

"I haven't any ideas," said Mirabel, "except to make the place remind me of the lake as much as possible. You recollect our villa there?"

" Perfectly ! What's become of it ? "

" It's mine still. I inherited it from my Visconti mother. I couldn't bear to part with it, or a single stick of the contents."

" Visconti, did you say ? " exclaimed Paula. " Are you a Visconti ? "

" Of course, though only a poor dilapidated strain of the Visconti who ruled Milan in the far-back times."

" But a real Visconti ? "

" Yes. The Sforza swallowed the main line, but there are several branches left. One, not ours, is one of the great families of Italy still. Ours has nothing but ancestry and that tumbledown villa on the lake."

" Oh, Mirabel, fancy a Visconti acting at a place like the *Babylon* ! "

" It's no worse than calling it the *Babylon* ! "

" Who lives in the villa now ? "

" I have left it in charge of old Serafina, to whom I give a pension. I could not bear to turn her out into the world at her age."

" Then shall I begin to-morrow ? " asked the practical Paula.

" To-day, if you like, dear. I am going down into the country in a week or two for a thorough rest, before I begin my rehearsals. And I suppose that things will turn up in which you will want my collaboration ? "

" Of course I shall, you silly child ! It's your house, and you have exquisite taste."

" Well, I'll be very good till I go away."

" Would you like me to come with you ? " asked Paula.
" It's dull work, resting by yourself."

" It won't be rest at all ; that's only the name we give it. I'm going down to stay with the relative who is giving me the house. He is very fond of me, and I've promised to go. But you can't think how I wish that I hadn't ! "

" I hope he isn't too fond," said Paula, her religious instincts pricking up their ears.

" Oh, my dear, there'll be nothing that the whole bench of bishops couldn't approve of ! The trouble is that I dislike him so, while he insists on exercising the family privilege of equipping me with sufficient splendour to make the proper impression as mistress of a house ! Isn't it pathetic ? "

" I'm not quite sure that you don't deserve to be whipped, Mirabel ! Nothing seems good enough for you ! " said Paula, whose speech was seldom restrained by the fear of giving offence. But, as Mirabel was being so good to her, this time she felt that she had gone too far and began to stammer an apology.

" Don't apologize. You will always be free to castigate me as much as you like with your tongue, which is sometimes worse than a stick, Paula ! We must be free to speak our minds if we're going to live together."

" I'm glad you recognize that ! Shall we have the drawing-room panels in cream or ivory ? "

" In the matter of house-paint," said Mirabel, " I don't think I know the difference."

* * * * *

" And what can I do for you, Mirabel, in return for all your kindness ? " asked Paula, as they were parting on the day before Mirabel went down into the country. They were not to meet at all on the actual day, Mirabel had said, because she had to leave home very early.

" Get everything finished before I come back, and engage the servants. I've told you what I want in that line—and come into the house as soon as you can, and begin running it. I shall have very long hours during the rehearsals, and shall have no time or energy for domestic worries. Rehearsals are always heavy work, but they are worse when you have to justify your appointment to a position for which everybody, except the man who bestowed it, thinks you unfit."

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When she got back from Westernport Mirabel was astonished at the transformation. The Georgian gate had been restored to the perpendicular, and moved complacently on its hinges ; the front door and the dressings round the windows were decorously painted ; the hall, when the manservant opened the door, gave an impression of deep comfort ; and the whole house looked as it must have looked in the eighteenth century. Paula had been as careful to avoid gorgeousness as she had been to preserve accuracy. It seemed to her absurd for two women living alone to allow

anything to look pompous, and she had bought no ornaments which did not serve a necessary purpose. Those she left for Mirabel to collect when they were out together.

The chief transformations were in the garden, and it was too dark to see them. Besides, it was already rather late for the tea, steaming in a dear little, three-cornered panelled room, which was next to Mirabel's bedroom, and looked out on the river—not upon Hammersmith's hearse-like bridge, but upon the bargey port of Chiswick, where there were watery phantoms hanging on the curtain of the dusk.

But the best of it was that Paula was there—Paula, with her face as pink and smooth as a child's, and her noble crown of hair ; Paula, with her alert blue eyes and lurking smile !

She hurried forward to give Mirabel a cup of tea. The slight, straight figure was in just the right dress to suit the surroundings and herself ; she had a genius for appropriateness. It gave Mirabel a thrill of pleasure to think that she would always have that charming presence to fill the house, and she was in good spirits. A load seemed to have been taken off her mind by having got through her visit, and being free to return to her chosen home. But when she saw how delightful everything looked, she did not forget to be grateful to the self-sacrificing and unwelcome relative whom she had just left, though he was her husband.

After tea Paula took her over the clean, fragrant, orderly house, to show her all that she had done. The very absence of ornaments was grateful to Mirabel, accustomed to the empty spaces of an Italian house. She felt that it was indeed a home.

CHAPTER XIII

OLIVER GRAY REFLECTS

WHEN Oliver Gray had seen Mirabel into her car, after that first-night supper, he went up to his flat, to sit in the cupola, his usual smoking-place of a night. He loved that gallery, which commanded such an extraordinary panorama of London by day, and even at night had an amazing view, when the cupola lights were lowered.

Gray threw himself down into his favourite chair ; the whisky decanter and a syphon and cigars stood on the table

beside it. He helped himself to a whisky-and-soda, a very temperate one, and lighted a cigar. Then he took out his watch, and saw that it was already past three.

From where he sat he had only to stretch out a hand to reach the switchboard for the electric lights, and as soon as he had emptied his glass he extinguished them, and started furiously to think.

That woman who had just parted from him, what would he not give to have her here beside him, with that caressing smile of hers, which had taken the audience in his great theatre by storm ! He had felt madly jealous at those smiles going to the audience, instead of himself. He would have given the whole theatre for them. He loved this woman as he had never loved anything before. And he could not have her, not for the mistress of his household, the lady at the head of his table, his daily and hourly companion.

He had taught her her business as an actress, and found her the most docile and instructable of pupils. He had prided himself on the way in which he had taught her all the stage artifices of musical comedy, and how in this particular play he wished her to burst upon the audience ; what actions she should perform to demonstrate her queenliness ; how she should receive the adventurer Chastelard's advances, and how she should receive the Fairy Prince, Darnley's, and a dozen other such matters. He even told her what to do in order to be *chic*. By his coaching he had always got better results out of his prima donna than any other impresario in musical comedy. Mirabel had taken all his instructions most patiently, and carried them out faithfully.

But what had happened when the play was presented seven hours ago ? No one had given a thought to all the stage tricks, which she had performed exactly as she had learned her lesson. They had been passed by as the laborious exercises of royal etiquette. What really charmed the audience, apart from her singing, was the play of her delightful personality. Seeing her, they could well picture how Mary, Queen of Scots (always royal, and full of the dignity and graciousness which she had acquired while presiding over the brilliant assemblages of the gay Renaissance Court of Francis II. of France), received with patience and tact and suppressed merriment the uncouth ceremonies of her unaccommodating Scottish subjects. They could picture

how Mary, accustomed to the affectations and license of troubadours, parried the impertinences and the affectation of adventurers, like Chastelard. The unwilling surrender of Mary to the real Darnley could not have been marked by greater spirit and consideration than Mirabel showed to her puppet Darnley.

Not one bit of this, which had so enraptured the critics, was his work. It was all due to her natural good breeding and spirited personality. And the worst of all was that he, like Chastelard, had dared to hope too high, and had been put back into his place by the strength of her personality.

His admiration was enhanced by the way in which she had concealed his rejection from the rest of the Company. No one obeyed him more cheerfully and literally. No one treated him with more unfailing graciousness.

The Company rather wondered at her calling him Oliver, when she treated him so formally in other respects, but concluded that he called her Mirabel because he called all of them by their Christian names, and that she called him Oliver, which none of them did, in the theatre, to show him that she was as good as he was. She treated him with charming cordiality, but she decidedly had the effect of a wet blanket on the cheery and audacious Oliver Gray. That he was not himself, when she was there, was the general verdict.

He was not aware that they said so, and it would have made him angry if he had known it, but he would have recognized the truth of the indictment.

The Company very soon began to think it a bore, for his vagaries had generally been connected with prodigal hospitality.

CHAPTER XIV

BETTY FARNOL PROTESTS

AFTER a play had run for a few nights, unless any changes were required, Oliver Gray left the running of it to his very able assistant-manager, Mr. Maccabaeus—"Old Mac"—who did the solid work of the production, and made the business pay such tremendous dividends. This astute person took a small salary and a very large commission which, since he was honest, paid both himself and his

employer. His brain and his vigilance were working ceaselessly. Gray's private expenditure on the ladies of his theatre was paid out of his private income, instead of them having blackmailing business arrangements. Such a reckless and generous man as Oliver Gray needed some protection of this kind, and though in contracts with large firms Old Mac was as hard as a flint, he was by no means unsympathetic with employées ; he merely stood out against being exploited. His theatrical knowledge and experience were marvellous.

Old Mac was an unmistakable Jew of the intellectual rather than the financial type. He had a fat face and a small black moustache, and might have been any age over forty-five. He had a thick Jewish voice, and a slow way of speaking, which enabled him to weigh his words, and disconcerted the " slim " people with whom he had to deal.

Oliver Gray gave many dinners at the *Babylon Restaurant*, which he hoped to make the rival of Prince's, though he preferred a dinner at a club, with two or three men whom he could take round to his box after dinner, whether he was host or guest. Most of them thought seeing a " bit of the show " at the *Babylon*, and going behind the scenes, a pleasant thing to do after dinner, and he liked to know what was going on—the play was not the only thing at the *Babylon Theatre*.

His big dinners were always on a Sunday night, when he asked some of the Guards' officers and other rich young men who were the chief supporters of the *Babylon*, and a few Society ladies who wanted to see life like their brothers and husbands, to meet the beauties and stars of his theatre.

" Mary, Queen of Scots " had now been running for nearly a month, and drawing enormous houses, and the beauties of the *Babylon* were grumbling because Oliver Gray had not given a single one of his famous dinners. They had expected them almost weekly, and to meet at them the latest additions to the ranks of the *jeunesse dorée* in London.

" What's the matter with the governor ? " asked Topsy Perks, the comedian, who came into every *Babylon* piece, usually in the dress of a ballet-dancer, as a fast little lady's-maid with beautiful legs.

Old Mac had a shrewd idea, and he sympathized with his employer, but he said, " He must have something up his sleeve. If he doesn't know his way about, I don't know who does."

"He does know a bit," said Topsy, "and he's a tip-topper; but I wish he'd hurry up!"

"I don't see what you've got to shout about! You've got somebody of your own!" said Old Mac.

"A lot of good he is, except for paying!—he's older than you are!" They were referring to Heinrich Loewe, a septuagenarian Austrian financier.

The assistant managing-director did not resent her freedom of speech; he liked the ladies of the Company to speak out their minds; it gave him a better idea of what they were doing, and he kept a chart of that in his memory.

He thought more of it when Beatrice Farnol—Betty to her intimates—who, though curiously ugly, considered herself the beauty of the Company, and had married the heir to a Peerage (forbidden his father's house in consequence), tackled him. Peers and their sons came a good deal to these dinners, and occasionally their wives, and Betty, who was clever, made good use of opportunities for ingratiating herself. Though no beauty, she was very graceful and witty, and could make the most of a part. She was one of the Queen's Maries.

Her husband, the Hon. Orlando Jebb, kept her up to it. He had married her because he liked the glamour of musical comedy; he thought that his life would be a perpetual pantomime thenceforth, and was bitterly disappointed when his wife cut herself off from the frivolities of the *Babylon* girls, though she was wise enough to keep in with them at the theatre, and tried to live up to his family, "the dismal Jebbs."

The suspension of the *Babylon* dinners made his wife's desires and his own for once flow in the same direction.

"He's never going to drop the dinners, is he?" she asked of Old Mac. "Already the Company is beginning to lose its *esprit de corps*."

His ears pricked; it was not necessarily a fact because she said so, but the point was a good one if it was true.

"Miss Douglas is awfully nice," she continued, "but the fact of her seeing absolutely nothing of us except in the theatre does not help our *esprit de corps*." She liked that expression. It made her feel as if she had been educated. "Besides, who is she?" added the Hon. Mrs. Jebb, rather vindictively, "that she should consider herself too good for us? Isn't my family good enough for her?"

Old Mac did not think that the Farnol family—in point of fact, its name was not Farnol—had the same breeding as Mirabel Douglas, but he did not say so. What he said was :

“ She may have gone on the stage against the wishes of her people. There are some people, you know, who think that the stage is a sink of iniquity, and are ready to cut their children off if they have anything to do with it.”

“ Horrid old beast ! ” said Betty Farnol under her breath. “ He’s rapping me over the knuckles ! How does he come to know such a lot ? ” Then, she suddenly changed her mode of attack. “ Good old Mac,” she said, “ do try and manage it for us. We all miss these dinners so much. I didn’t mean what I said about Miss Douglas ; she’s an awfully nice woman, and she has some good reason, I’m sure. I know I’m a cat, but I can’t help it.” This she said because his remark about puritanical families reminded her that he was one of the new leading lady’s most devoted admirers.

“ There may be something in what you say, my dear.” She did not writhe at the familiarity ; Old Mac was in the habit of my-dearing every woman in the theatre, but he never went any further.

Oliver Gray was worried when Old Mac ventilated the subject, repeating exactly what the two girls had said, so that his proprietor might form his judgment for himself. For as it happened, Mirabel was in a way at the bottom of it. He had not even thought about the dinners. Although they had served a useful purpose, he had given them, not because he felt under any obligation to do so, but because he had wanted to. Now he did not want to give them because Sunday afternoon and evening constituted his time for seeing Mirabel Douglas. He used to get there in time for tea, and stay on to dinner.

What exactly his patron’s relations with Miss Douglas were Old Mac had no idea. Their attitude to each other was distinctly formal, for a theatre like the *Babylon*. She never went to his flat, and never went anywhere with him. He did not even know that Gray went to her house on Sundays.

He considered that Gray had taken leave of his senses in advertising for a leading lady for “ Mary, Queen of Scots,” and, out of the hundreds of candidates who applied, there were several whom he would have picked out before her. But, when she did the waltz-song in “ The Merry Widow ”

with Stradella, he saw that she had the makings of a star of the first magnitude if she could do the dancing. She had a gorgeous voice of the sympathetic kind which is necessary for musical comedy, and she had the best smile for an encore which he had ever seen.

Of her dancing he had not been sure, until Stradella suggested that she should dance the *tarantella*, which showed that she was graceful and could dance well, and had beautiful limbs, though she might not be a Lily Elsie. She was certainly a lovely and charming woman, and that smile would bring the house down.

More madness followed. He was not even shown the contract which his chief was making with Mirabel Douglas. He was merely told that she had a ten years' engagement at the same salary as the last leading lady—sixty pounds a week. She was the prize pupil of a dramatic school, and he gathered that, although she had never had a part before, she had declined to come unless she received these terms.

Still, engaging ladies was Gray's affair, not his. And now that she was a success with the public he was quite glad that she had got the post. She would be a much pleasanter person to deal with than women like Tara, who were eternally complaining or demanding some fresh concession, and whose vulgarity sickened even him, after his experience of theatrical life.

CHAPTER XV

GRAY PAYS HIS FIRST CALL UPON HIS WIFE

"I AM going to be at home always on Sunday afternoons, Paula," said Mirabel, when she came back from Westernport.

"Sunday's the best day," said Paula, "if you don't want to go away for week-ends. For many men it's the only afternoon which they have free."

The last part of her reply was rather obvious, but Mirabel only noticed the first part.

"No week-ends for me, thank you, at this time of the year!" she exclaimed, giving Paula the impression that the visit had not been altogether a success. Paula rejoiced that her fears had been groundless.

"Besides," said Paula, "one's Ranelagh friends can drop in on their way back from golf."

"I haven't got any Ranelagh friends—or any friends, really," said Mirabel, quite simply, "except the girls who were at the Lyceum with me and the people at the theatre; and there are hardly any of them whom I could call friends, though I get on all right with all of them, except the vulgar ones. You can't think, Paula," she said, with sudden viciousness, "how I hate vulgarity! And vulgarity is as common in musical comedy as mud on a rainy day!"

"Shall you tell them that you are going to be at home on Sundays?" asked Paula, chiefly for something to say; she had no reason for asking.

"Only the Lyceum girls, and the girls in the piece, if they ask me, and I like them well enough. We shall have to depend on your friends for at-homes."

"Then, may I ask why you are going to be at home on Sundays?"

"Because Oliver Gray asked me to."

"Your manager?—the proprietor of the *Babylon*? Are you going to let him come here? I thought he was such a bad man! There's no man in London with more affairs to his discredit! He's as bad as the Guards' officers, who take their stalls for the season to have the right of going 'behind'!"

"What?" snapped Mirabel.

"I mean what I say," said Paula. "Everybody knows it!"

"I don't," said Mirabel stoutly.

"Well, it's rather decent of Gray to keep it out of your sight!" said Paula. "Perhaps the reason why he gave you a dressing-room with a separate entrance is because he wants you himself."

"Indeed it's not; the only reason why he did it is so that I should not be annoyed by the Johnnies who hang about our stage-door."

"I hope you made a great point of his protecting you from these men who are certain to try to force their acquaintance on you?"

"My dear, he made ever such a point of it himself! He has given me a most explicit lecture on their arts and crafts, and has even given me a speaking-tube to Mr. Maccabaeus's office, in case I should ever want to call for assistance."

"He seems determined that nobody should annoy you but himself!" said Paula grimly, hitting the target right in the centre of the bull's-eye.

"Well, he's shown no sign of that, anyhow!" retorted Mirabel. "And if he does, I shall know how to deal with him! He has, in fact, suggested that he should come and see me here on Sunday afternoons, when you will always be present, instead of being seen having long conversations with me alone at the theatre."

"What does he want to have long conversations with you for?" snapped Paula.

"Oh, my dear Paula, how could you ask such a banal question? Would not any man, who had conferred such a huge favour on a girl as he has conferred on me, by making me his leading lady, wish to have the pleasure of her society sometimes? I am not so vain as not to be conscious that he gave me the post, where there were others with better claims, simply because for some reason he liked me better. And he has inspired me with such a shrinking that I give him uncommonly little in return! If he wishes to come and see me on Sunday afternoons, I think it is his right, and I shall be as decent to him as my feelings will allow me!"

"Thank heaven for your feelings!" said Paula. "May you always retain them, to preserve you from this Bluebeard!"

* * * * *

The first Sunday afternoon after Mirabel's return from Westernport arrived. A late Indian summer had made the early part of it perfect. The pond had been converted into a water-garden, with terraced slopes, and every eighteenth-century garden ornament had been skilfully restored. The plain windows at the back of the house had been made picturesque with green *jalousies*. It was quite dark before tea was over, because Oliver Gray, who was to be their only visitor, it seemed, did not arrive till after five. Mirabel had warned Paula that she must not be surprised at their calling each other by their Christian names. This was a familiarity, she explained, which it was impossible to resist in musical comedy.

"Ugh!" said Paula. "How disgusting!"

"One has to be philosophical about the minor points, if one stands out on essentials," said Mirabel.

Paula admitted the force of this more than she expected.

It was the front-door bell which had started the conversation, and immediately afterwards Don Juan was shown in.

Mirabel's face broke into its lovely Italian smile, as she went forward to shake hands with him. "Oliver, may I introduce you to Miss Maitland, my greatest friend, who lives with me?"

Paula held out her hand, and as he advanced to take it she scanned him narrowly. He was rather a tall man, with a singularly good figure, and the first thing that struck her about him was that she had never seen a man so well dressed. Dress was generally uppermost in her thoughts, even at such a critical moment as this, when she was, as she thought, settling the future of two human beings. She could not say what his well-dressedness consisted in, except in complete absence of fault; there was nothing to pick out about it. When she had settled this, she looked at his face. He was a fair man, with a face tanned to a brick-red. His hair was auburn, and he had gay blue eyes. She thought he was just the best-looking man she had ever seen, and decided at once that she must spread her wings for the protection of her chicken. But she felt that it would be impossible to be angry with him, unless he did something very outrageous, which he seemed disinclined to do.

"I'm sorry I'm so late, Mirabel," he said, "but I've only just got away from my desk. You can't think what a lot there is to do at the beginning of a rehearsal, even on Sunday, especially when . . ." he was on the verge of adding, "when you've just been away," but stopped, and said—"when you're introducing history into musical comedy for the first time!"

That was a lucky phrase. Paula was Scotch and enamoured of useful knowledge. She wanted at once to know how he had treated the story of Mary, Queen of Scots.

Mirabel was prepared for cold douches, but Gray's professional instinct for advertising saved him. "Oh, I've left it entirely to experts," he said. "We've had men from the Record Office and Oxford and Cambridge."

"No one from Edinburgh?" asked Paula rather fiercely.

"Edinburgh?" he said. He divined that Edinburgh had to come in on the top. "What's the exact title that chap has who takes the King's place in opening the Church business

which they give the Scotch to console them for having no parliament?"

"The Lord High Commissioner."

"Yes, that's it! Well, I'm going to ask him to the full-dress rehearsal, to say if all the ceremonials satisfy him."

This was pure audacity, but Paula would have no chance of proving whether that chief subject in Scotland received the invitation or not, so the situation was saved. Gray, who, like Paula and Mirabel, was Scotch, saw that he would have to be very careful with Paula where Scotland was touched. To change the dangerous subject, Mirabel said :

"I wish you'd been here earlier, Oliver, to see what we've done to the garden. We've . . ." She stopped suddenly, remembering that he was not supposed to have seen it. But Paula had noticed nothing and she changed her intended remark to : "We've got such a jolly old garden, and Paula's made it look twice as nice by turning the old pond there was into one of the new water-gardens."

"I'll come a little earlier one Sunday," he said, "so as to see it, if I may."

"I shall be very cross if you don't," said Paula. Her professional pride as a decorator was aroused. She wanted to take this charming, if wicked, young man round all the special points herself, and to tell him that she had done them, and to hear him praise her skill. She, at any rate, had nothing to fear from him.

He had taken a seat beside Paula. He chose it with care to face a large mirror, in which Mirabel's whole figure was reflected. He could stare at her in the glass without embarrassing her, or drawing Paula's attention.

Another woman would have detected him at once, but Paula was in the habit, when she was holding forth, of talking right at the other person without noticing what she or he was doing. If they were out for a long walk, woe betide them unless the other person knew the way. Paula would simply walk on talking blindly.

While Paula talked, and Oliver Gray fitted in a word where he had an opportunity, or on the rare occasions when she paused for him to do it, Mirabel sat eyeing them indulgently, and breathing the benediction of her smile upon them. She wished them to like each other; she preferred that his conversation should be with Paula, for fear of his

embarrassing her with the ardour of his feelings, or betraying them to Paula.

While this one-sided conversation was going on—Paula had written a novel on Mary, Queen of Scots, under the title of “The Lady of Lochleven,” and was telling him her views straight on end since she could not get him to state his—Oliver Gray made a critical study of his leading lady’s charms, first in one mirror, then in another. There was a big mirror from floor to ceiling at each of the cardinal points, and he could see three of them from where he sat.

First, he noticed that everything about her was graceful, from the set of her beautiful little head to the finely-moulded feet, so exquisitely slippared. This was a general impression, always before his eyes.

Second, when Paula became very interested in what she was saying, and he could venture a direct stare at the mirrors, he noted how rarely chiselled was that pure, oval face, with its soft forehead, its perfect eyebrows, its short, straight nose, its sensitive mouth, and its noble chin.

When Paula grew less concentrated, he could no longer gaze so steadily, and studied more general effects, like her clear, colourless skin, which an emotion of pleasure, excitement or anger could flush with crimson so easily, or the jet-black hair, which, like her marvellous eyes, she inherited from her Sicilian grandmother.

But the eyes themselves he could not fathom where she was seated, a picture of lithe grace, although she had her knees crossed, in a way which would have horrified our grandmothers. For that he would have to wait till he could engage her in conversation, face to face, about theatre business. She must want to hear that.

As she sat there, her eyes looked quite black. Sicilian eyes are almost Oriental in the dilation of their pupils. Paula flowed on without any sign of intermission, and he saw a look of amusement and sympathy creeping into those eyes. There was no relief until one of Paula’s golfing friends at Ranelagh dropped in, on his way home, to see her in her new abode.

Paula was very popular with her men friends, on account of her wit and her animation. At Mirabel’s request, Paula had not told any of the friends to whom she sent at-home cards about her house-mate’s profession. There was nothing

which Mirabel desired less than to be a peep-show. So when she presented Colonel Dunlop to Miss Douglas, and Miss Douglas presented Mr. Gray to Colonel Dunlop, he thought no more about them than that they were two "jolly good-looking" young people, who probably would like to be left to themselves. The Colonel would have been wildly interested if he had known that this Mr. Gray was the king of musical comedy, and this Miss Douglas was his new prima donna.

"Now then, Oliver," said Mirabel, when the Colonel turned back to talk to Paula, "come and sit by me." The eyes, which showed the dark of the irises now, said frankly: "You've been very noble. She's been talking right above your head, and you've been pretending that you were taking it all in with the highest interest." Her face looked very soft and sympathetic. She was composing herself to let him do the talking.

"First tell me how you are," he said. "I hope that all the rehearsing has not knocked you up, Mirry? As it happens, you are more on the stage than anyone else. The author knows that if the leading lady is not, the play does not stand much chance. But you're such a funny girl that I daresay you would rather not be on the stage so much."

"On the contrary, I would rather be on the stage the whole time. But I don't want to be doing things the whole time. I should prefer to watch sometimes, like the guards."

For a moment he was inclined to say: "The Guards in the stalls?" But the subject was likely to become too difficult for him to care to joke about it. His late leading lady had been on decidedly friendly terms with them, and their attentions would not be palatable to Mirabel.

"Well, I want to tell you," he began, "how jolly good you are in your part."

He thought the look of mingled modesty and pleasure on her lovely face was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

"Do I remember all the things you told me about the stage-tricks and effects of musical comedy?"

"I think so—the general result is right, anyhow. But I'm not talking of them; they're a mere matter of rehearsing. It's what you put into the play, which the author probably intended, but did not put into his directions, that pleases me so much."

" You mean the little bits of temperament which I try to put into my attitude to Rizzio and Chastelard and Darnley ? "

" Yes ; you are trying to put some story into the thing, which the author had made a mere string of *tableaux vivants* to be linked together with songs. I wanted a musical comedy with a good vein of romance running through it. You mightn't think it from the shows I put on. That's why I chose ' Mary, Queen of Scots.' "

" You must remember that I've never seen any of them : "

" Nor are you likely to, unless you have to take a night off for voice trouble, or something of the kind, and take the opportunity to go to the front of the house."

" I hope I never shall. I'm very tough."

" You tough ! " he said, smiling compassionately at the lovely soft face and the delicate grace of the figure.

" And you'll find it out if I'm put to the test," she said, in laughing warning.

" I hope that you have not had any annoyance at the theatre ? " he said.

" None whatever."

" I'm glad of that. But it will be a bit more difficult when the piece comes on. The young man about town is a bit difficult to manage when he is making a night of it, even when he isn't the sort who goes on making a row until he has the satisfaction of being turned out. A new leading lady makes a great stir among them."

" Still, I suppose that they are gentlemen, and don't press themselves where they see that they are not wanted ? "

" That class . . . yes," he said, after a pause of deliberation, " except when they are reckless with drink. It's the old men about town—above all, the very rich no-class Jews—who don't understand a ' no. ' "

" What can one do with them ? " she asked, not terrified so much as with a council-of-war air.

" Send for Maccabaeus. That alarm which you've got to the office will always bring someone to your dressing-room."

" It's awfully good of you, Oliver. You're keeping your promise to look after me." There was a look of dependence on him which was as good as a caress. It was difficult to realize how much it meant to him. He had never been so

much in love in his life, and he was under a bond not to allude to it.

But there were compensations. If he kept his bond, he could be in her presence for a long while every day. And it was his pleasant duty and interest to be observing her nearly the whole time, for he was responsible for choosing her, and getting over her inexperience by special training. And it was her pleasant duty and interest (as Mary, Queen of Scots—not as the Mirabel Douglas with whom he was in love) to exert her powers of charm to the utmost, so that he always saw her in a favourable mood.

"Do you like your house, Mirabel?" he asked, in search of a safer subject.

"I love it! It is my own. It was given me by a relative of mine, who wished me to cut a proper dash as leading lady at the *Babylon*, and just because I was his relative, he not only bought it for me, but told me to have it decorated and furnished at his expense—*carte blanche*."

"I'd have done more, if you'd let me."

"I know you would: but remember our bond."

"I remember it night and day. It keeps me awake at night."

"Does it? You make me feel horribly guilty. But I can't help it, I'm afraid. I gave you full warning before we made our contract."

"I know: I'm not trying to go back on it, though Heaven knows how I want to."

"And so do I. And I know that you're being a gentleman about it. But you interrupted me in telling you about my relative."

"I beg your pardon."

"I've been staying with him—much against my will. But I had promised, and I owed so much to him. And it wasn't so bad as I expected. I couldn't help respecting him, though I hated going. And he's such a very near relation that nobody could object to my going there, even for a woman who has to be so frightfully careful of her reputation as I have, in my very difficult position."

"Does anybody know that you went to stay with him?"

"Nobody except Paula, and she hasn't the foggiest notion where I went. She doesn't care much, because there

is nothing to make her jealous about it. Paula is horribly jealous of my liking anybody but her, but she sees how I hated the whole thing, and how glad I was to get back to her, so my elderly relative is at liberty to fry in his own juice, as far as she is concerned, always provided that he does not come here, and give himself proprietary airs about me. And you can bet that I shall keep him out of Paula's path as long as possible!"

"Poor old devil! I can sympathize! How hard you women can be!"

"Not hard, Oliver, but brave. We don't want to hurt the man; we want to defend ourselves."

"Remember that a woman can hurt a man very easily, Mirry."

"Can she? Well, I know one woman who never wants to. But she has to be . . . oh! so careful!"

Suddenly they heard Colonel Dunlop's voice a little louder: "Well, I must be getting home, Miss Maitland. I've got to catch a bus and a train, and have a tub, and get into my swallow-tails, all before half-past seven." Then he dropped his voice, and said in tones which did not reach them, "Who did you say your pretty friend was?"

"Miss Douglas."

"And the man?"

"Mr. Gray."

"Gray . . . what is he?"

"Something in business."

"He ought to be in the army—he'd make a fine-looking soldier."

"He's splendid, isn't he?" said Paula; the poison was working.

"Yes, he is splendid."

Colonel Dunlop came across the room. "Good night, Miss Douglas! good night, Mr. Gray!"

"Go and let Colonel Dunlop out, Oliver," said Mirabel.

"I'll let him out myself, thanks," said Paula, with the air of "he's my friend," and quite forgetting that Mirabel had asked not to be left alone with Gray.

Mirabel looked a little distressed, and her husband, quick to divine the reason, said, "I'll say good-bye very quickly, Mirry, so that I may catch him up at the door, and give him a lift in my car as far as the station."

"I've told them to lay a place for you at dinner," objected Mirabel.

"That is nice of you: but I'm not dressed."

"We're not going to dress for dinner on Sundays," said Mirabel. "People who are calling will often stay on, won't they, Oliver?"

"I know one who will, whenever he's asked!"

"He'll always be asked if he does not mistake hospitality for something else."

"May I make a habit of dining here on Sunday night then?"

"Of course you may, on those conditions."

CHAPTER XVI

A BABYLON DINNER

O LIVER GRAY had dined there every Sunday night since, and had won warm approval from both women. Mirabel found that she could trust him absolutely not to speak on the forbidden subject, or to do or say anything which led up to it. Paula had quite given him her heart.

"I don't care whether he is bad or not," she said. "He's the nicest man I ever met! Why in the name of heaven don't you marry him, Mirabel? He's obviously dying to have you, and he must be very rich, and able to help you on in your profession more than anybody in London. As Mrs. Oliver Gray you will always be his leading lady."

"I can't," said Mirabel, "it isn't possible."

"Idiot!" said the candid Paula.

"I believe I am," replied Mirabel drily, "but still the matter rests there. I'm very well off as I am, and I've no desire to make any change."

Oliver Gray, too, was a happier man. If he could not have Mirabel as his wife, reigning over his home, he could visit her in her home, for several hours every Sunday, perfectly disarmed, genuinely glad to see him, and ready to make quite an intimate friend of him, on that one condition.

The theatre had no notion of where Oliver Gray spent his Sundays. None of the girls had suggested coming to see Mirabel, although she was distinctly liked. They felt some-

how that the surroundings would be uncongenial, since she fenced herself in so from the gay horde of admirers, who surrounded them.

Some of the Lyceum girls came once or twice, and Mirabel was most warm-hearted in her welcome of them. But, when they had been once, most of them felt themselves too shabby to go to such a luxurious house.

The luxuriousness, on the other hand, appealed to Paula's friends, for literary people and artists are accustomed to going to houses of those who are much wealthier than themselves, to be lionized.

Gray was glad of this, because his name did not mean as much to these people as it did to actresses and theatrical aspirants, and he could remain practically *incognito*, and talk quietly to Mirabel.

Suddenly the destructive finger touched the house of cards. It was on a Monday morning that the faithful and candid Maccabaeus had said, "Don't you think it's about time that you gave one of your *Babylon* dinners, Mr. Gray?"

"I don't think there's any time about it," Gray had answered, "and I've been off them lately."

"Yes, I know that, and everybody's noticing it, in my humble opinion," said the assistant-manager. He took it that Topsy Perks and Beatrice Farnol had only repeated to him what every other woman in the theatre was saying. "I'm afraid that wrong ideas will get about," he said.

"Wrong ideas? What wrong ideas?"

"Oh, not that the bookings are bad—the public can test that for itself! But the stalls might get the idea that you're going to let the character of the place down, and might shift themselves to one of the other musical-comedy theatres." Old Mac's idea of letting the character of the place down struck Oliver Gray as exquisitely funny.

What Old Mac was afraid of was that the rowdy young officers in His Majesty's Guards would be afraid that he was going to let the character of the place up. But he had no intention of doing this. "Because thou art virtuous," wrote Shakespeare, "shall there be no more cakes and ale?" Because he had amended his ways to win the love of a very particular young lady was no reason for robbing London of one of its pleasant vices.

"I believe you're right, Mac," he said. "The only

reason why there haven't been any dinners lately is because I have drifted into spending my Sundays in a different way."

"It's that damned golf!" said Old Mac, quite wide of the mark. "It'll be the ruin of legitimate business!"

"Oh, not so bad as that!" said Gray cheerily, willing to let his lieutenant imagine that golf was the cause. Old Mac knew that Gray was "somewhere down about scratch," and enjoyed nothing more than playing for "big money," and so getting his exercise and his gamble at the same time.

Old Mac went on his way rejoicing, to have the invitation-cards printed for the Sunday week, and to tell Gray's secretary to submit a list for the invitations to his employer.

On the Sunday week, at six-thirty for seven, with a view to the earlier closing hours of the Sabbath, a brilliant company assembled in the Zenobia Room of the *Babylon Restaurant*.

In this brilliant assemblage, apart from any acting ability which lurked in the members of the Company who were invited, and Oliver Gray himself, there was not a single person who was known to have any intellect. Their brilliance lay in the fact that they had inherited wealth, and in some instances titles as well, and obeyed the dictates of fashion in the squandering of money. And some of them were beginning very young. Lord Avondale, for instance, a dear boy, who was almost as pretty as Mirabel, and rather like her, except that he was very fair and she was very dark, was only twenty.

Among the guests were Lord Bexhill, a gallant soldier, who had left the army to be a director in a prosperous motor-car business; the Master of Tantallon, another soldier, from whom even the *Babylon* girls shrank for his cold-blooded recklessness; Augustus Baldock, a fool, very rich; Dudley Niven, an ass, the son of a famous man; Bob Matthias, like Lord Avondale the darling of the *Babylon* girls, a brave and charming boy, who was making ducks and drakes of his property as fast as he could; Orlando Jebb, heir of the pious Lord Lampeter, a rollicking, light-headed person, who had married Beatrice Farnol; Desmond O'Neill, late of the Munsters, a typical *mousquetaire*; Hughie Sprot, whose vacant expression was his fortune as chief comedian of the Company, and Willie Waters, the hero of the piece, a young man with a soft face and long-lashed violet eyes, and very,

very sleek hair, who, having a fine voice and a fine figure, had been selected for the part of Darnley. Mary's half-brother, the Regent, Lord James Stuart, was there, too, in the person of a delightful-looking young Welshman, of good estate, named Owen Tudor. Gray gave him good parts because he had been a special friend of his at Oxford, and was a fine athlete, and a regular man-about-town. He was an amateurish actor, and had only a fair voice, but he looked the part in most of the characters he had to play, who were dashing young sportsmen, and Gray would not have that kind of part played by any other sort of man. It was not his fault that he was suddenly asked to play the part of the Scottish Lord Burleigh; Gray gave him this part because he thought he ought to find a good-looking half-brother for Mirabel; and it really did not signify, because he only had to wear fine clothes properly; he was of no importance in the piece, compared with Topsy Perks, the soubrette who took the part of Queen Mary's lady's-maid.

Chastelard was there, too, in the person of Mr. Ferdinando Powney, a tall, French-looking man, with shoulders padded square, a Vandyck beard, a very twirled moustache, and the sort of brown eyes which in a woman go with a picture-hat. He was, for the moment, talking to John Knox, who despised him as heartily as the original would have done. John Knox was, in the *Babylon* Company, Mr. Colin George Geddes, a very spruce Scotsman, with a little moustache, whose dominant characteristic was that he always looked the best-shaved man in the country. He was one of the wags of the Company, who would really have enjoyed a low-comedy part better, but he played the part of Knox with austerity and dignity, although he was only chosen for it because he was the best actor they could lay hands on with a scintillating Scotch accent. As everyone knows, really good actors with a Scotch accent are as rare as Aberdeen Jews, and Geddes, who could speak broad "Perth," was required to be as Scotch as "Bunty pulls the Strings." John Knox was rapidly becoming the most popular man in the Company; he was such a prince of good fellows.

Most of the women present might just as well have had numbers as names. They were merely beauties for whom idiotic parts had been invented, not a whit more appropriate than mediaeval typists and telephone-operators, the

former of whom would have been of great assistance to most of Queen Mary's nobles.

The female characters in the play who had any significance whatever were only half a dozen, and one of them was Queen Mary's foster-sister, without it ever having been recorded that she had one. But there were unfortunately five principal beauties at the theatre who had equal claims to be the Queen's Maries, only four in number, so something had to be done; and exquisite Phyllis Batey—who had a dreadful way of speaking—became the daughter of Mary's foster-mother, an occupation which in commoner circles has a commoner name. This was an inspiration of Old Mac, who was very tactful.

The part of Mary Hamilton, the principal Mary, clearly belonged to Guinevere Jones, who expected to have been leading-lady when Tara broke her contract and bolted to America.

As Mary Beaton had a good deal to say, her part was given to Beatrice Farnol, who was the grouser of the theatre, and brought all the complaints to Old Mac. She was forgiven her grousing because she had a natural infirmity in her face which made everything she said appear screamingly funny. Combined with this, she had, oddly enough, an extraordinarily graceful figure, of the staccato kind, which made her very effective. It was a novelty having one of the five principal beauties a really witty comedienne, however ugly her face was. It was also, Old Mac thought, a striking novelty to have an ugly beauty. The Hon. Mrs. Jebb was, of course, not informed that she was promoted for her ugliness; that was a secret between Old Mac and his employer.

Mary Carmichael and Mary Seton were merely graceful and beautiful girls, who might in time come on to be leading ladies, or might always languish on as principal beauties. The names they had modestly taken were Louise de la Vallière and Carrie Christmas. Louise was as unlike the other fair beauty, who took the part of Mary Hamilton—Guinevere Jones—as any two fair beauties could be; for Guinevere, who, when she was at the board-school was Jenny Jones, would, it was thought, have already attained the distinction of leading lady if she had had the forethought to classicize her surname as well as her Christian name; for she was what is called superb, with a face and colouring which

were quite beautiful. Others thought she had failed because she looked a shade too massive in a manager's office, though from the gallery, without glasses, she was matchless ; there was no one to touch her when distance lent its enchantment.

Carrie Christmas was an Irish girl, with the typical blue eyes and dark brown hair, and a robin's perkiness.

Old Mac, who was never in his seat for five minutes, acted as master of ceremonies at Oliver Gray's delirious dinners. He made no attempt to arrange the seats, beyond the few about which Oliver Gray had given orders. The guests made their own arrangements.

This system had generally acted perfectly. The hitch at the present dinner was merely due to the youthful Lord Avondale's not playing the game. The heir to the great Earldom of Douglas was a constant patron of the Green Room, and because he was such a boy, and so wonderfully good-looking, he was thoroughly spoilt. He was invited chiefly to please the Queen's Maries, and the Chorus beauties. He was so popular that there had been considerable difficulty in appropriating him ; but finally he was placed between Beatrice Farnol and Carrie Christmas, the lively ones of the party.

There had been a special competition for him on this occasion, because he had gone up to Scotland for the Twelfth, and had stayed there, fishing and shooting, and running after a certain lady at a round of country-house visits, until the midnight express of the night before. He had therefore not seen the play.

The Viscount Avondale had other ideas. He did not in the least care for Beatrice Farnol ; she was far too faddy and self-important. He prefered the loudest ladies of the Chorus to her. But his mind was not with them to-night. He considered the leading lady a jolly good-looking girl, as he put it, and studious inquiries had led him to believe that not one of the adventurous "birds" who haunted the purlieus of the *Babylon* had been able to get a single word with her. This made him white-hot to achieve it.

But Mirabel was exactly one of the people about whose placing Oliver Gray was most particular. She was to sit at his right hand, to honour her as the new leading lady, and also—and just as much—in order that she might be under his protection at a banquet from which he would

have preferred her absence, infinite as was the pleasure her presence afforded to him. And on her other side he had placed Captain Desmond O'Neill.

Now, Desmond O'Neill was an arrant flirt, but perceiving that Gray, whom he knew and loved like a brother, was "horribly in love," he was certain to eliminate his own personality while he tried to make her enjoy her evening. But his value did not end there. Desmond, who had spent a good part of his nights of manhood at riotous entertainments, and was a person of infinite tact and experience, could be trusted to stop any reveller who, as the fun grew fast and furious, tried to stray Mirabel's way, by persuasion, or, if necessary, by leading the intruder away with a *ju-jitsu* grip to have another drink, in spite of its unnecessariness.

His duties began earlier than usual, for when they filed in to dinner, he found Lord Avondale seated in his place, as the only one which he cared for, since he could not take the chair.

"This is my seat, I think," said Desmond.

"There aren't any seats at Gray's dinners," said the twenty-year-old, who must, by his age, have been to so many of them.

"But it is my seat, I'm afraid," said Desmond very politely. "You know, if you have been coming to these dinners for years, as you seem to have, that seats are always reserved for Gray's own guests."

"Well, I mean to have this seat," said the boy, who was as brave as a lion as well as very spoilt.

Desmond was not in the least ruffled. Like most very strong men, and fine boxers, he enjoyed keeping his temper when there was trouble about. He merely said, "Of course you can have your seat," and, stooping down, put one hand under each side of the chair, lifted it up as if it had been a feather, though his victim stood six feet one, and carried him out of the room, while everyone roared with laughter.

When he got there he said: "Now, Lord Avondale, you can't have a scrap with me, because I am two stone better than you; and, as a member of the National Sports' Club, you probably know that I have held the Boxing Championship of the Army. What are you going to do?"

"Do?" said the boy. "I'm going to take your arm, and walk back into the room laughing like the rest of 'em!"

"Splendid!" said Desmond. "Shake hands! That takes some pluck! But you must promise me not to annoy Miss Douglas any more to-night—at least, you needn't promise, because you know I'm not going to let you."

"Why must I promise?" said the boy. "How do you know I'm not her cousin? My name's Douglas, just the same as hers!"

"That proves nothing," said Desmond. "Douglas is a commoner name than Smith in the circles in which you move, young man!"

"Oh, I give it up, Captain O'Neill!" said Lord Avondale, laughing really heartily. "But, I say, you might introduce me afterwards, if I promise to be good!"

"I'll ask Gray if he will, if you're not too excited by that time," said Desmond. "But I know that he'll be very particular about it, because he had great trouble in making her come. She'd heard about these *Babylon* dinners—and they are a bit . . ." What he said was lost, for they reached the room at that moment, and since they were arm in arm, and laughing, the guests, who had grown rather anxious, clapped them uproariously. As they were parting, Desmond whispered to the boy, "I like your pluck—you can say that we tossed and I won."

For a couple of hours after this people were only eating too well and drinking too well, incited by rag-time music from the orchestra of the theatre, and beauty and high spirits. Then the real fun of the evening began, with John Knox being called upon, as John Knox, to sing "Whisky, whisky, whisky." It was after the whisky had begun to mingle with the champagne that there was an increasing amount of "cheerfulness," in which the men were the victims, and gestures and jokes grew freer. The songs, especially, broadened.

Mirabel was thankful that she had not asked for an invitation for Paula, and went away long before the end. She could not help feeling a good deal disgusted, though she had kept her eyes to their own little circle as much as possible. For one thing, Oliver Gray, who had honourably kept his promise of directing all his conversation to the lady who sat on his left, had, as the evening wore on, been entangled in a fire of ribald repartee with the gay young men who had been chosen as their cavaliers by the

Queen's Maries, either for the night or for a much longer period. It was for them and their kind, whose prodigal support made the theatre the most prosperous in London, that these dinners were chiefly given, and they felt bound to express their cordiality to their host. It was a very free-and-easy cordiality. No doubt was left in Mirabel's mind that if Oliver Gray had been sitting among them, he would have been the most favoured of the cavaliers, and his very type suggested that the stories of his gaiety were true. How was she to live with such a man as his wife?

However faithful he was to her, it would be difficult not to suspect him, when his profession made him the target of the most beautiful and unprincipled women on the stage, who would stop at nothing which made them the chief ladies of a theatre, where those who desired it could marry into the Aristocracy, and those who sought to feather their nests in a different way could do so.

She did not know whether to be angry with Gray, or to applaud his honesty for making her come to see him as the centre of some of the fastest life in London. Of course he was the centre of it, and must continue the centre of it unless he elected to close down his business. But need he have brought it under her nose? First she wondered; then she thought that he ought, though she felt the gulf between them widening.

And now that he had got her there, was she to admire or to resent his inflexible honesty in refusing to make the slightest pretence of playing the plaster-saint? It was true that he did not initiate any of the lively passages of perilous wit between himself and the ladies of her court, and their admirers, but he made no attempt to wet-blanket them. On the contrary, he drank the toasts and accepted the badinage as he would have at any other dinner, though he said nothing risky himself, and refused all invitations to go and join the circles where the fun was fastest. To these he persistently shook his head, while his eyes said: "I have my own guests whom I cannot leave."

"That's that Mirabel Douglas! Isn't he *gone*?" said Betty Farnol to Lord Bexhill, whom she had annexed, because he did not come as a lover, but in search of amusement, having a pretty wife of his own, who had a passion for the theatre.

Beatrice Farnol did not wish for lovers either. She only accepted the invitations as a matter of business. She was afraid that if she dropped out of the set, she would be supplanted by some new favourite of the "b-hoys," and as long as she was in it she was bound to be popular, because she was one of the wits. And, further, since Lord and Lady Lampeter continued to rigidly exclude herself and the Hon. Orlando from the home of his ancestors, she maintained the policy of extending her acquaintance with the Peerage through such members and cadets of it as strayed to the *Babylon*. They generally knew her husband, a popular, idiotic "Johnnie," who was at the present moment thick in some roaring fun on the other side of the table, and took her up cordially. Lord Bexhill, who had met her in this way, had made his wife invite her a year ago, and now Lady Bexhill said that no party was complete without her wit.

When Betty Farnol repeated her remark to him, he said : "I don't agree with you. While we've been here, I've been looking across you at her a good lot. I wanted to make out why . . . why . . ."

"Why what?"

"Why he had given her the post instead of you," he said, wishing to be polite.

"Keep your sarcasms to yourself, Bexhill!" said Betty, firing up.

"I'm not trying to be sarcastic. I'm merely expressing the fact that he ought to have given one of you Maries the chance, and you're the Mary I'm talking to."

"Oh, well," said Betty, a little mollified. "Go on! You've been looking at her all the time that you have been talking to me. It's what I had to expect, I suppose—all men are alike! Give a moth a new candle! Let me see . . . you were trying to say something . . . ?"

"Yes, I was trying to say that I had been watching them a good deal, and that he has only spoken to her as much as bare politeness demanded. He's been devoting his whole attention to Lady Paradox on his other side."

"I should think he had to, when he had put her on his left, and young Mirabel on his right!"

"That's quite proper," said Lord Bexhill. "It's the first of his dinners that she has been at, and she's the new leading lady, and she's given him a tremendous success!"

" I can't see that she's had much to do with it ; she's only a cipher with a voice ! "

He had the courage of his opinions. " I think she's the biggest catch musical comedy has ever had."

" Oh, thank you, Lord Bexhill ! You are polite, aren't you ?—ramming this interloper down my throat !" she said, and turned round to Lord Avondale, who sat on her other side, with a mischievous smile on his face. He, too, had been watching Mirabel, equally to the disgust of Carrie Christmas, who sat on the other side of him.

" What do you think of her ? " asked Betty.

" Who ? "

" That Douglas woman."

" Out of her place. She's a ripper, and I daresay that she does her part all right. But she isn't fit to be leading lady in this place, because she isn't going to live up to its traditions."

Betty did not make any rejoinder. She was really longing to cut the stage altogether, and be chaperoned round by her mother-in-law, as the future Lady Lampeter. Her ambitions were social since she had landed the Hon. Orlando.

" Hang it all ! " he continued. " It's pretty thick—asking a lot of people here, and not introducing one of them to his precious Mirabel ! I should have thought that that was the whole object of the show ! "

" He knows you too well, Archie ! He's in love with her."

" Well, hasn't he been in love with any of the others ? "

" It depends on what you call love. He never lost the whip-hand of the others till they bolted, and he doesn't seem to be able to move her an inch in any way she doesn't want to go."

" What does that prove ? "

" That he wouldn't stand it unless he was in love with her."

" I don't see your reasoning, but I think that your assumption is correct, because he was going to introduce me to her if he could get her permission."

" What do you think of her, Johnnie ? " he demanded of John Knox, alias Geordie Geddes, who was sitting opposite to them. " You have a lot to do with her in the show, don't you ? "

" An awfu' nice wummin, wha gangs thro' the hale pair-

formance as if it had a' happened in her ain hoos—a pairfect leddy a' the time."

" That doesn't sound very dramatic," sneered Betty.

" There's nae drama aboot it. There ha'e been folk wha saw even tragedy in the heestory o' oor Mary, but the author is nane o' them. A'm thinkin' that he jist stairted oot tae pit some co-medy intilt, and richt puir co-medy it was, until the Company misremembered their pairts, an' hed, as A micht say, tae improveese."

" And did ' the pairfect leddy improveese,' too ? " asked Archie.

" Na, na ; she's rale partic'lar aboot her words."

" Where does she come in, then ? "

" Weel, weel, A'll tell ye ! There's a durrty pairson—na, A'm no thinkin' aboot you, Maister Powney, but jist o' the meeserable character ye're presumed tae represent—this durrty pairson is there tae mak' luv tae her in the sairvice o' the French croon, tae keep her frae makking a ralely daicent mairrage, tae mak' her sikkar on her throne. He's jist been writin' a wheen vairses—no the halesome Scots sort, wi' eight in yae line and sax in the ither, aboot his mither or his bairns, butt a lasceevious body wha coonts the pairts o' a wummun's pairson ! Aweel ! she jist pits him in his place like, wi'oot wishin' tae bee exack'ly unceevil—a pairfect leddy a' the time, until Dairnley comes bye, wha she has tae mairry, gin she wud save Scotland frae an unfreen'ly country tae the south o' it. She's nae mair attrackit tae hum than tae"—he waved his hand—" Maister Powney—A'm no wishin' to gi'e ye the ither man's name, hit's so fierce-like. This Dairnley was only a spune-fed descendant o' King Henry VII., of 'Ngland, wha oor freens tae the south micht set up ~~as~~ a Preetender, if he was na takken intul the faimly."

" And what did ' the pairfect leddy ' do aboot him ? "

" A was aboot tae tell ye whan ye unceevily interruptit me."

" Sorry, my mistake ! " said Archie.

" Aweel, A thocht she was jist deesplayin' the richt condescension o' a Queen, fur instead o' playin' them the ane contrary tae the ither, she deescouraged first the ane and then the ither, until Dairnley, in the coarse o' the last twa acks, sang her intul a richt frame o' mind. But, mind ye,

there was a body ca'd Reetzio, wha was richt weel acket by ma freen on the richt, Sir Parsifal, wha had something tae say tae hit. No that he said onythin' direck'ly tae the pint, as far as A could see. He was a kind o' secretary-body, wha she hed takken on, no for his typing nor his shorthaand, but because he could lilt like a mavis. . . .”

“ How much ? ” said Archie.

“ Hoot, mun ! . . . a mavis, or a merle, or something ! A dinna ken the English names for they birds. But dinna interrup' me . . . what was A sayin', Betty ? ”

“ You were saying something awful about Parsifal.”

“ Aweel, as A was sayin', when ye unceevilee interrappit me, that he lilit like a mavis.”

“ Poor brute ! ” muttered Archie.

“ An' could accompany her Majesty richt bonnily on the lute, hwan she sang her ain sangs.”

“ I thought he was on the loot ! ” said Archie.

“ Losh me ! wha iver heered o' there being that kind o' loot in Scotland, hwan a' but a meeserable twa or threc millions o' us hev left the countree fur nae ither reason ! ”

“ I don't quite follow you,” said Archie.

“ I think it's only a matter of grammar,” said Betty sarcastically.

“ Grammar be dammed ! ” said John Knox. “ What are Colin Geordie Geddes an' James Airchie Douglas, wha is ca'd Lord Avondale, daein' here at this table if Scotland wud gi'e us a leevin' ? What was A sayin', Powney, hwan these ither folk interrappit me ? ”

“ You were sayin' that Rizzio accompanied Her Majesty very prettily on the lute, with which I don't agree.”

“ Maybe no,” said Knox, “ but ye maun admeet that a lute was a mair conveenient eenstrument to tak' aboot wi' ye than a pianny, afore the days o' motor-trakshun ? ”

“ What are you driving at, Johnnie ? ” said Archie, who was becoming tired of a general conversation, and wanted to get back to the lively conversation of Carrie Christmas.

“ A'm cumin' tae the pint, if ye'll stap unceevily interrappin' me.”

“ The next man that opens his mouth I shall shin him under the table ! ” said Archie. “ Or John Knox won't get home in time to say his prayers before he goes to bed.”

“ There's mair chance o' me sayin' them than you, Airchie ;

hit's deed cairten that ye'll be put tae bed, gin A judge by the condeeshun o' your remairks ! ”

The laugh was now against Archie, and John Knox was able to finish the story of his “ Honey Pot,” Mary, Queen of Scots, as it had been presented at the *Babylon Theatre*.

“ The fack is, ma freens, that this Reetzi could play upon her hairt-strings mair pairfectly than he could play upon the lute, an’ she wudna heed eether o’ them, if it hed’na been tae mak’ a guid curtain—jist for that, an’ naethin’ else, she mairrit Dairnley-Waters there, at the same time as her maid—that’s Topsy, on the ither side o’ you—mairrit Hughie Sprot.”

During this broken monologue Parsifal Shelley, who was sitting immediately next to John Knox, a slim young man, with a sensitive, lantern-jawed face, and large, dark, melancholy eyes, had been writhing in his seat. He was new to musical comedy, being a concert singer, imported to deliver one beautiful tenor song, and then be a lay-figure. His voice was even better than Darnley’s, and his gentle dignity as a lay-figure was not inferior to Darnley’s acting. He disliked these personalities immensely, having had no previous experience of *Babylon* dinners.

John Knox, who, in spite of his part, was a kindly man, bit his lip in annoyance at having turned the stream of chaff upon so inoffensive an object, and looked round for a foeman more worthy of his steel. Not far away on the opposite side he perceived Simon Scrymgeour, a big, powerful man, who had been selected to play the part of Bothwell, for his protruding chin and malevolent eye, since he had nothing to do in the play except glower at Darnley.

“ Ye ocht tae be ca’d Scrimjer in the play, Simon—hit’s sick a muckle mair terrifyin’ name than Bothwell fur knockin’ the stuffin’ oot o’ puir Waters ! ”

“ These parsons,” said “ the Scrimmager,” as he was called in the theatre, looking down on him from his superior inches, “ will have their little joke ! ”

John Knox turned to Rizzio once more. “ He canna tak’ a joke like ye can, Parsifal ! A’ll bet that ye hed your wee joke wi’ oor Mary the while she was playin’ wi’ Dairnley ! The stage-whispers that dinna form pairt of the play mak’ the grandest drawin'-room co-medy that was never written ! ”

Rizzio was now seriously annoyed, and said, quite stiffly,

to the ribald Knox: "As my name is Shelley—Percy Shelley, in fact—you will allow me to say 'one word is too often profaned for me to profane it'—and that word is not love!"

"Damm!" said John Knox. "I've put my foot in it again!"

There was a hush at this which made everyone hear: "Oh, Archie, you are a dull boy to-night!" from the pouting Carrie Christmas.

"Don't bother 'Charlie'! Can't you see that I'm in love?"

"What business have you to be in love with anybody but me?"

"Ask me another! There are a lot of 'records' in my heart!"

"You're quite right—I wish I'd never had anything to do with such a blooming gramophone!"

"His mistress's voice!" said Archie, and there was no look of reproof on John Knox's face.

Carrie said nothing, but put a sticky cherry down the back of Archie's neck, and applied herself to a simulated consolation of Parsifal Shelley, which was really directed through him to the edification of John Knox. But she soon tired of this, and returned to Archie, who had his back to her, and was not to be moved, for at that moment Mirabel was getting up to say good-bye.

Gray prepared to see her off, but she said, quite brusquely, Lady Paradox thought: "No, you mustn't leave your guests, Oliver! Mr. O'Neill . . ."

"Captain," said Oliver, and the correction was so smiling that he did not appear to have noticed any brusqueness.

". . . Will see me to my car, I'm sure?"

"Of course I will!"

When he returned a few minutes later he said: "If I were you, Gray, I should try and marry that woman."

The almost sickly expression on Oliver Gray's face showed him that he had made a *faux pas*, and he added under his breath: "So you think so, too!"

CHAPTER XVII

HOW ARCHIE FORCED HIS WAY INTO MIRABEL'S DRESSING-
ROOM AT THE BABYLON

O LIVER GRAY should have known that it was not necessary for the sort of man, whom he had asked that night, to be introduced to a woman at the dinner ; in point of fact, such a man is a great deal more interested if he is not introduced. Almost every man who was there wrote to him and asked for an introduction. To all of them he returned the same answer, to the effect that he would have introduced them on the evening itself if Miss Douglas had not expressly requested him not to do so, because she wished to keep her private life and her stage life entirely separate.

There was one of the guests at that dinner who did not intend to take a *no*, and that was the very youthful Lord Avondale. A few nights afterwards, by the venality of an attendant, he made his way to her dressing-room, at the end of the second act. It was a carefully-laid plan, for he knew that she was not on the stage for the first quarter of an hour of the third act. He made his dash the moment the curtain fell, and waited behind a turn in the passage till the attendant came to say that she had passed into her room. The same man had let him understand that she did not have her dresser in till the bell rang for the curtain to rise. The woman was a prattler, like all her kind, and Mirabel liked to have a few minutes' perfect quiet to rest her brain when she came off the stage.

She heard a knock at the door.

"Don't come in!" she called out languidly. "I want to rest a little longer." She took it for granted that it was the dresser.

But the door opened, and when she turned to chide the woman, she saw not a woman, but a delightful-looking boy, who probably was twenty or more, to judge by the particularity of his dress, but who did not look more than seventeen. He had perfectly smooth cheeks, dazzlingly fair, and

his small features would have done for a Greek statue, if it had not been for the expression of dogged, schoolboy pluck on his face. He had clear blue eyes and corn-coloured hair. But the feature about him which you could never forget lay in his teeth, when he laughed. Mirabel, born and bred in Italy, was accustomed to exquisite teeth, but it was not only the dazzling whiteness and the shape of his teeth which charmed so, but the extreme beauty with which they were set in crimson gums. Mirabel had never thought about anyone's gums before she saw how perfect this boy's were. She could not help glancing down at the ermine and crimson velvet of the crown she had just laid down. She felt her breath catch at his beauty.

But in an instant she was on her feet, with her own cheeks flaming. She did not know who he was, for she had turned her eyes away in shame and half-sympathy when Captain O'Neill had humiliated him by carrying him, chair and all, out from the dinner. She did not care who he was. He had forced his way into her dressing-room, which was the same thing as forcing his way into her bedroom, for she should have been dressing, if she had not felt so tired.

"Leave my room at once, you naughty little boy!" she said to the six-foot Guardsman.

He laughed. It was really the guilty laugh of a boy who has been caught, and if he had been an actor, doing it on the stage, the house would have been enchanted by its ingenuousness and its charm. But Mirabel was far too angry, by this time, to notice such things.

He tried to brazen it out. "Not so fast, my dear! I am not a little boy—I am an officer in His Majesty's Foot Guards!"

"That makes it much worse," she said, getting up and putting her hand on the bell. "Now, are you going, or am I going to summon the manager?"

"That won't frighten me; he's out of town, I know! He's staying with a man in my Regiment."

"I should say, the assistant-manager!" she said severely. "Mr. Gray would not come merely to turn you out!"

"Gray wouldn't turn me out; he's a friend of mine!" he said, with boyish boastfulness.

"Mr. Maccabaeus will, in double-quick time. Now, are you going?" she said.

"Not just yet. How pretty you are, close to! And I see you don't use any make-up to get the dead-white cheeks of Queen Mary's portraits!"

Still she did not ring. What an odd boy it was, discussing the colouring of the Mary Stuart portraits, when he was just on the verge of being thrown out of the *Babylon Theatre*! What on earth could he know about them? Though he was quite right—the accepted portraits did have dead-white cheeks, and the author had remarked that she would do without any make-up.

"But, I say, our portrait of her has red hair, and you've got black, and they haven't made you put a wig on! I suppose they thought it was so effective, or something, that they let you do without! And, of course, it is stunning hair!"

"Are you going to leave my room?"

"I will soon, I promise you, and I promise faithfully not to give you any trouble—I did come for a lark, but I see you're not that sort! I do want to have a good look at you now that I'm here: I don't suppose I shall ever see you so close again!"

Mirabel's finger was sliding off the bell. This time she said, "You really must go, or I shan't have time to dress!"

"Mayn't I see your eyes?" he said. "I thought they didn't look quite right through the glasses, and I see they're not brown, but something mixed."

Mirabel gave a half-smile—how humiliating to have her eyes described as "something mixed" by this brat! But he seemed to be engaged in a serious historical study, according to some picture which his family swore by. She wondered whether it was in a book, or a miniature. He really spoke as if it was authentic, and she imagined that all the authentic paintings of Mary were in well-known galleries.

"You're Scotch, too," he said—"I can see that by your cheek-bones."

Mirabel forgot herself so far as to say, "Why, do they stick out?"

"No," he said, "but they make your face turn down, instead of up, like an English face."

The air of wisdom with which he delivered this remark was too much for Mirabel. She burst out laughing, but at that moment her eye fell on the clock on her dressing-table, and she saw what the time was. She rang the bell so

furiously that old Mac came flying to her room to know whether the theatre was on fire, or she was being carried off by masked highwaymen.

"This boy has mistaken his way," she said. "Please show him out."

Lord Avondale gave Old Mac a wink—he had known him ever since he became a man, not very many months ago, by receiving that commission in the King's Foot Guards—and Old Mac told the attendant, who had accompanied him in case of an emergency, what to do with him, and addressed himself to what he considered the much more serious emergency of Mirabel barely having time to change her costume before she went on. He knew perfectly well what must have happened, and decided on the dresser's dismissal that night. She must have had pecuniary reasons for not coming to dress Mirabel at the usual minute, and he meant to find out which of the attendants was responsible for the enemy slipping through the defences. The question for his swift decision was: Should she scramble into her other costume as quickly as possible, and chance being behind time, or should she go on as she was? He decided for the latter. If she dressed too hurriedly there might be something just wanting to the picture, and there was no earthly reason why she should have a different costume for the beginning of the third act, when she was going to change into her wedding-dress half-way through it. The only person who would really care—Oliver Gray—was out of town.

Having made this decision in his own mind, he confided it to Mirabel. "I hope that you weren't seriously annoyed?" he said.

"I was very much annoyed!" she said. "But as he was so young, and behaved like a gentleman when he saw what a mistake he had made, I don't think I need complain to Mr. Gray about him. You'll deal with the dresser, of course, and any other persons who were concerned with letting him through?"

She said this with a relentlessness that rather surprised Old Mac.

"Yes," he said, "I'll deal with them. The dresser will have been late for dressing you because she was intoxicated, and will be discharged accordingly. This is a sufficiently unforgivable crime in a theatre, and needs no investigation.

Whoever it was who let him through will be discharged for being absent from his post : he will know what it means, and will not protest." As he was going out of the room he turned back, bubbling over with merriment as only a Jew can. " It's a pity it couldn't have all happened on the stage, Miss Douglas—you'd have been so much more in the real line of our stalls than you ever can be as Mary, Queen of Scots ! "

CHAPTER XVIII

MIRABEL'S DRIVE HOME

AS her car bowled swiftly home Mirabel thought of the affair in her dressing-room.

Her first feelings were of disgust. How horrible it was that such a child should be trying to force his way into actresses' dressing-rooms ! He ought to be at school instead of in the Guards, and he had behaved like a school-boy when she ordered him out.

Then she could not help thinking of his singular beauty and charm—that cupid's mouth—no, it wasn't a cupid's mouth, for there was no suggestion of the baby archer's bow about it. It reminded her more of Apollo's mouth in the exquisite statue in the Vatican, which represents the god in an elegant woman's dress and shoes and coiffure, surrounded by statues of the Nine Muses, a favourite presentation of Apollo, before the conquests of the Great Alexander made it the fashion to give Apollo his features and attributes. Not that there was anything effeminate about the boy's lovely face. The honest and fearless eyes were those of a man who finds no pleasure equal to that of discovering a fine fresh way of risking his neck. He was a darling, that boy, though he had tried to break into her dressing-room ! How glad she was that he had not gone away when she sent him ! She liked his grit ; she liked his ingenuous discussion of her appearance and make-up ; above all, she liked his breeding—she was sure that he was " a man of family."

She half regretted now that she called Old Mac and had him put out; for she would probably never see him again. Old Mac knew far too well how wrathful Oliver Gray would be to let the incident recur. Of course, she could get his

name from Old Mac, but her pride revolted at the very idea of any advances from her.

Ah me! this was the first time that she had ever felt like falling in love, and the whole romance was over in a quarter of an hour! Besides, what was the good? He would not want to marry her, and if he did, it was impossible. She could never marry for her ideals now, till death parted her from Oliver Gray.

Even at the time when she married him it had hardly seemed worth while, though it gave her a start in life such as she had never dreamed of; though her fortune would be made before she was twenty-three years old, and though she had never known what it was to fall in love, in spite of meeting some of the most delightful men in the Italian aristocracy, who had summer villas round Lake Como.

Yet the boy's escapade belonged to exactly the same category as the episodes in Oliver's history which prevented her from falling in love with him. He had not come to her room to discuss his father's picture with her. She knew enough of the world to be quite certain of that.

She did not tell Paula anything about it.

What would her feelings have been had she known that her car was followed, all the way home, by a taxi containing the aggressor?

Archie, when he had been turned out of her dressing-room, after a vain attempt to catch her eye across the foot-lights from his stall, had gone outside with this object. Round the corner from the stage door he found another door at which was standing a Rolls-Royce car with the Douglas crest on the panels. Guessing that this must be Mirabel's, he had jumped into a taxi and told the driver to follow that car wherever it went until its mistress left it.

As soon as Mirabel started, the taxi followed and, straining its powers, managed to keep the Rolls-Royce in sight until it stopped at a house on Chiswick Mall at the corner of the Weltje Road, where its mistress got out and let herself in with a latch-key. The name painted on the gate was Bolingbroke House. That then was her home.

CHAPTER XIX

HOW ARCHIE MADE MIRABEL RECEIVE HIM

ON the next morning she had only just finished breakfast, and was passing the telephone-room on her way to the garden, when its bell rang. "I'll go to it!" she called out to Paula.

"Thank you, dear," said Paula, who did the catering of the household, and was at that minute engaged in puzzling the cook.

"Is that 'Hammersmith four fives'?" said a voice which she seemed to recognize.

"Yes."

"Who am I speaking to?"

"Miss Douglas."

"Miss Douglas?—that's all right! Well, I am Lord Avondale, and I want to know if I may call upon you some time this afternoon?—any hour which suits you."

She did not in the least connect him with the naughty boy, and she had a great curiosity to see Lord Avondale, for which she had her own reasons. But after the experience of last night, she felt the necessity for being cautious. She wanted to find out if he was telephoning from his father's house. It would have been much more to the point if she had asked him how he got her telephone number, seeing that it was not in the book. As a matter of fact he got it because the mess-butler had a friend at the central telephone office who found out addresses for him, since the junior officers were for ever telling him to ring up somebody whose initials and address they did not know.

Archie, finding that there was no Miss Douglas, Bolingbroke House, Chiswick, in the telephone book told the mess-butler to ask at the Central Exchange if she had a number, and if she had to get it for him. The answer came back that her number was "Hammersmith 5555."

When she asked Archie where he was speaking from, and the answer came, "Belgravia Barracks—I'm supposed to be on parade," it struck her like a cold douche. But it put a

new point into her head. The Belgravia Barracks were always occupied by Guards, and if Lord Avondale was in the Guards, and she was very adroit in her cross-examination, he might be able to tell her something about that boy. All Guards officers would know about each other, she supposed, though reflection might have suggested that this was what he would have called "a large order."

"Yes, I will be at home if you call at three o'clock," she said. She wished to see him without Paula, and Paula was going to a matinée. She would be able to let him stay a decent time, and dismiss him before Paula would return.

Punctually at three o'clock a taxi drew up at Bolingbroke House. Mirabel was in the drawing-room awaiting her visitor.

The door was opened, and her manservant announced : "Lord Avondale."

It was not without emotion that she saw her boy, of whom she had been thinking so much. But she was almost purple with anger as she strode across the room to reach the bell.

"What is this new trick which you are playing on me ? I think I deserve better of you after my leniency last night !"

"But I don't understand you !" he said. " You told me on the telephone that I might come ! "

The voice did seem the same. "I think it was you who spoke to me on the 'phone this morning," she admitted, "but it does not prove that you are Lord Avondale."

"Well, I have my card, and a beastly presentation watch, and . . ."

"I'll trust your word of honour. On your word of honour, are you Lord Avondale ?"

"Upon my word of honour, I am."

"Well, I accept that. And now tell me to what I am indebted for the honour of this visit ?"

"I'm so much in love with you that I had to come and tell you how sorry I am for my behaviour last night."

"Lord Avondale," she began, in tones which cut like an icy wind.

"Well, I can't help it, can I ?"

"I shall tell your father and mother about you."

"They wouldn't mind—I mean father wouldn't mind—I mean, he wouldn't be surprised. But you don't know them, do you ?"

"No."

"But I'm sure mother'd see you if you wrote and told her that you wished to report me for insulting you. She's frightfully interested in the stage."

She could not repress a smile. "Lord Avondale, if I didn't like you so much, I'd have you turned out of my house!"

"You do like me then—a little?"

"Yes, of course I do—or I should not have put up with all your nonsense!"

He did not relish this sort of liking much. It was only a shade removed from snubbing. But since he had really fallen in love with her at first sight, he was thankful for the smallest mercy.

"You must think me a very common sort of person," she continued, "to allow you to force yourself on me in this manner."

He could not be anything but honest. "Well, I was rather pleased."

"But I shouldn't have said what I said unless you had really been Lord Avondale."

"No, don't," he said, "don't tell me that you, to whom I have felt more attracted than anyone whom I ever saw, bow down to a title!"

"Why should I, when my grandfather was Lord Avondale till he succeeded to the Earldom?"

"Then you're one of us—Mirabel?"

She noticed the way he hesitated over the *Mirabel*, and thought that he must be hinting at the fact that her name did not appear in the peerage, and said, "I'm Isabel Douglas, daughter of your father's uncle Archibald."

"Then why do you call yourself *Mirabel*?" he asked in his inconsequent way. "Is it stage-swank?"

"No, it's a nickname they gave me in our little *paeese*."

"Our little how-much?"

"Oh, *village*—I shan't tell you why."

"I think, if you don't mind, I'll call you Isabel; it'll save such a lot of explanation when you're meeting my people."

"I don't suppose that many of them will want to meet me," she said, with perfect complacency. "I'm disgracing them."

" You're sure of the Governor, and he, after all, is the head of the family. He's the best soul that ever was. But he's got the 'peculiars.' "

" What are you implying, *caro mio?* "

" Merely that he doesn't do things quite like other people. I sometimes tremble to think what my pals must be thinking ! "

" What grammar ! You certainly ought to be at Eton—I suppose it was Eton ?—still."

" Why do you chaff me about looking such a kid ? "

" Because I don't like the way you've been talking of your father. I am sure that he is far too good for you ! "

" Of course he is ! "

" That's better ! And since we're on the subject of behaviour, I hope you recognize that the reason why I have forgiven you is because I am your cousin, and old enough to be your aunt ? "

" I wish you were my aunt ! " he said sardonically.

" Why ? " she asked, unsuspiciously.

" Because then you'd be sure to kiss me."

" Perhaps I should like to, but it would be far too dangerous." She knew that she had never met any man, whom she would have been so ready to kiss, but she thought of Oliver Gray, whom she kept starving for affection. He would have a right to be jealous if she did this. And he was so good and patient !

He thought she was hesitating, and pressed his advantage.

" Do be a good aunt ! " he said.

" I can't," she replied. " I have a very faithful lover, however much I wish I hadn't."

" Tell me one thing," he said. " Are you going to marry him ? "

" No, I can't."

" Then why don't you give him 'the push' ? "

" What would be the good ? I could never marry anyone else while he was alive."

" What a ripping good sort she is ! " thought the boy—" won't marry anybody else because this chap is so fond of her, and feels that she can't marry him, because she isn't sufficiently fond of him ! "

But Mirabel's thoughts were the exact antipodes of what he supposed. Under her placid exterior she was cursing her

stars because she could not marry this delightful boy, who had told her that his heart was hers, the boy who would one day be head of her family. She loved him, too, and she knew it.

He saw her weakening, and like the certain man who drew a bow at a venture, he made another allusion to her being his aunt.

She was sorely tempted. It was the most delightful mouth.

But at that moment the door opened and in came Paula. The matinée had been so stupid that she had left after the first act. With the novelist's instinct, she detected that it was an interesting situation.

She drew back towards the door, but Mirabel called out, "Come here, Paula. I want to introduce my cousin, Lord Avondale."

Paula was fairly gracious to him. It was difficult for a woman to help being gracious to such a delightful boy. But she was a Socialist at heart, even to her Creator, and she meant to have it out with Mirabel when he had gone. She concluded that the quickest way of getting rid of him was to give them an ostentatious opportunity for saying good-bye by leaving them alone, so she said that she was going to take her hat off. Also, she wanted Lord Avondale, if he did stay, to see her hair.

When she had gone, Mirabel said, "Now you must say good-bye, Avondale. I see that Miss Maitland has something important to say to me, which she can't say before you."

"I expect she has!" he said significantly. "But, by the way, couldn't you call me Archie?—I always have been Archie! There's no reason why you should go on calling me Avondale, when all those Lizzies of yours call me Archie." This was his way of indicating the Queen's Maries.

"Well, Archie, you must go," she said.

"Right-ho! When can I come back?"

"Any afternoon between three and five, if you 'phone up to see if I'm free. I can't have you after five, because I have to have my dinner so early, and I can't have you in the morning because . . ."

"Oh, that's no matter: my country needs my services in the morning, taking horrible muddy marches to Hounslow and that kind of thing!"

"So you really do do some soldiering—drilling and marching?"

"Yes, to my misfortune! Why can't the Army simply fight when it's wanted to, instead of all this sort of tomfoolery? I should like the fighting all right."

"But, my dear boy, how's an Army to be an Army if it doesn't do its lessons?"

"Ask me something easy! It's an awful bore!"

"Good-bye again, Archie!"

"Yes, I will say good-bye. Can I come again tomorrow?"

"Yes, I think so, if you don't mind going for a run with me in the car—I need every bit of fresh air that I can get! I simply *lived* in the open air in Italy."

"Are you going to be an aunt?" he asked, as they shook hands.

"No, of course not! Miss Maitland might come in at any moment!"

As she rang the bell for her man to show him out, she reflected what a foolish thing she had just said. He would think that it was only the fear of Paula's sudden appearance!

CHAPTER XX

THE HEIRS OF THE BLACK DOUGLAS—PAULA WARNS MIRABEL AGAINST ARCHIE

PAULA had been watching from her window to see the taxi go off, and lost no time in making her appearance.

"Well, Mirabel," she began, "I shouldn't have expected it of you! It shows how places like the *Babylon* can deteriorate the nicest women!"

"I don't know what you mean, Paula!"

"Don't know what I mean!" said the uncompromising Miss Maitland. "You can't take up any scurrilous paper . . ."

"I never should," said Mirabel.

"That's quibbling! . . . You can't take up any scurrilous paper, I say, without finding allusions to the presence of the young men who throw their money about 'in front' and

'behind,' at the *Babylon Theatre*. There's no name which occurs more frequently in this ménage than Lord Avondale's, and I don't suppose that there's a single den of dissipation in London, which has any pretensions to extravagance, where he would not be known by sight! I own that he's a most charming person to look at, but he's one of those detestable young people whom they call the b-h-o-y-s! How can you wonder that there are strikes?"

"Oh, poor Archie!" said Mirabel, determined to rub it in.

"Archie, indeed!" snorted Paula. "How long have you known him, that you should *Archie* him?"

"Just about eighteen hours," answered Mirabel, calmly.

"Well, I call it the most disgraceful thing I've ever heard of! And to cap it all—your *Archie* would call it 'putting the lid on'—you introduce him to me as your cousin! If you'll excuse my saying so, without any intention of being offensive, I must say that it reminds me of the cooks in the back numbers of *Punch*, who, when their mistresses discovered policemen having supper in the kitchen, always said that they were their cousins!"

"Thank you for the simile?" said Mirabel, who never allowed herself to be offended by Paula's gibes. "But, as it happens, Lord Avondale *is* my cousin, and if you don't believe me, you can go and look it out in your peerage! Of course, you have a peerage?—every Socialist who can afford it has a peerage!" she added, giving her one back.

"Yes," said Paula, "I have a peerage!" She literally blushed to admit it. The only excuse she could think of to defend her conduct was: "A writer must have one, to avoid pitfalls! Besides, it's only a five-shilling one, which I bought half-price at the Ladies' Marlborough Club when the new one came out."

"You needn't defend your conduct, Paula," said Mirabel, drily. "I think no evil."

"I suppose that's a hint to me!" said Paula wrathfully.

"Oh, no, not at all! But hadn't you better get your peerage to settle it?"

Paula went and fetched it, and turned up *Avondale*. The entry read: "Avondale, Viscount (Master of Douglas), son and heir of the Earl of Douglas, *q.v.*"

She turned to the *Earl of Douglas*, and discovered that

the family were descended from the good Sir James Douglas, the comrade-in-arms and chief General of King Robert the Bruce. No titled relatives were given, except the said James Archibald, Viscount Avondale (Master of Douglas), but the second heir was given as *Isabel Douglas*.

"I don't see any mention of you among the relatives," said Paula, in almost vindictive triumph.

"Of course you don't—that peerage only gives titled relatives, and I have no title." She did not say, "I am that Isabel," for a new idea had struck her.

Paula could not understand Mirabel's strange hesitation while they were examining the entry. She could see that there was something behind it, some clue which she intended to unravel, with the novelist's holy joy. To her mind Mirabel was guilty of deception in one of two ways: either her claiming Lord Avondale as a cousin was a flimsy subterfuge and excuse to respectability, or she was a very, very distant—a tenth or twentieth—Scotch cousin, and Mirabel had simply been bragging.

Presently she said, "Well, of course, it's your house, and you can do what you like with it. I recognize how good it is of you to let me have this charming home without its costing me a penny. And if you want to use me to cover your indiscretions . . ."

Mirabel started, rather impatiently.

" . . . No, I don't mean any offence!" said Paula, feeling that she had gone too far. "What I mean is that, if you feel that you can be freer in asking men to the house if I am about to chaperon you, I am entirely at your disposal, provided that they behave themselves. I really have very advanced ideas—I am not moral, though I hate vulgarity! I don't care what you do so long as you are decent enough not to annoy people with it. But ragging, and throwing things about, and fastness in appearances generally, revolt me."

"You give me a nice character, don't you?" said Mirabel, managing to keep her temper by being amused.

"I'm not giving you any kind of character: I'm only warning you of the kind of troubles, which a woman can hardly avoid if she's leading lady at a place like the *Babylon*."

"It's very good of you," said Mirabel, with an intonation which was capable of more than one interpretation.

"And do be careful about that Lord Avondale! He's an awful young *routé*! He has beauty and charm enough, if it were in a woman, to lure the Pope from the Vatican! With such a man a woman never could be sure of not losing her head."

Paula's unaimed shaft flew home. It was quite true what she had said. Mirabel did not like to contemplate it, and, afraid of what Paula might say next, she said, "I'm going to telephone for the car to come round. I want to do some shopping: don't wait tea for me. I dine so early that I'm really better without it."

The car was at the door so quickly that she did not stop to change the graceful black satin slippers, ribbanded to her ankles, but slipped into her furs and threw her hat on. Mirabel had not yet learned to treat hats with the proper awe. She had never worn one on Lake Como, except when she went into a town.

"Hatchard's," she said to the chauffeur—"you know, my bookseller in Piccadilly."

Hatchard's had not got what she required in stock, but offered to get it for her.

"I want it now," she said. "Where can I get one?"

"Well, the publisher 's quite near, at 45, St. Martin's Lane—Harrison and Sons, the King's Printers."

Mirabel flew round to Harrison's. There they seemed to have nothing else, except this particular book, and a lot of pamphlets about the size of *Modern Society*, which were of all thicknesses, some unbound and some in blue paper covers. She paid for her purchase, and told her chauffeur to fly home as fast as the law would let him.

When she got home, she sailed upstairs, carrying the parcel. She wanted to run, but she felt that being out of breath would put her at a disadvantage. She found Paula still at tea—Paula, when she was alone, always read at tea, and lost all count of how many cups she drank.

"Here's a present for you, Paula," she said.

"What is it, dear?"

"A this year's 'Peerage.' "

Paula cut the string—which was unusual for her—with the cake-knife, and found herself possessed, for the first time, of "Burke" for the current year. She thanked Mirabel profusely, and turned over the leaves with a feverish im-

patience till she came to the Earldom of Douglas. It occupied two or three pages, and Paula, unaccustomed to "Burke," could not make head or tail of it, though she confined herself to the period after 1850. The parentheses of children by second and third marriages, and the "issues" of younger children, simply bewildered her. But of one thing she was quite certain: between the years 1850 and 1913 there was no Mirabel Douglas mentioned.

"Look here," said Mirabel, running her finger through it as rapidly as if it was arranged like an *A B C*, instead of being arranged like a *Bradshaw* (Paula wondering all the while whether this intimacy was the result of a journalistic study to substantiate that twentieth cousinship), "that's my father." The name she pointed to was the *Hon. Archibald Douglas, second son of the twenty-third Earl*, described as of the *Villa Visconti, Lake Como, Italy*, who had married in such a year *Donna Elisabetta Visconti, daughter of Don Prospero Visconti, and grand-daughter of the fifth Duke of Alcamo, Sicily, with issue, one daughter, Isabel*.

The Hon. Archibald, it appeared, was brother of the twenty-fourth Earl, and uncle of the present, or twenty-fifth.

Paula started at the mention of the Villa Visconti.

"Now, you see," said Mirabel.

"No, I don't."

"Well, I'm that Isabel Douglas."

"Yes, but why was there no mention of all this when I was visiting you at the Villa?"

"Why should there have been? My father was almost Italianized, because he had lived in Italy so many years. He had dropped all communication with people at home, except with the lawyers who sent him what remained of his fortune, and in point of fact, his letters from England were always addressed to the Hon. Archibald Douglas, and his Italian letters to *Il Onorevole* or *Il Nobile Don Baldo Douglas*. In the *paece* he was simply Don Baldo, as you knew him."

"So you are first cousin of this boy's father?"

"I am."

"Do you know him?"

In point of fact, Mirabel did not know him, but she did not intend to satisfy Paula's inquisitiveness. "Know my own cousin!" she said, and she added, because she could see from the triumph in Paula's eyes that she had some question ready

which would embarrass her, "Why, I'm his heir if anything happens to this boy!"

"His heir!" gasped Paula.

"Yes, the second heir, Isabel Douglas, mentioned in that neat little 'Peerage' of yours."

"But you're Mirabel."

Mirabel repeated the explanation she had made earlier in the afternoon to her cousin. She did not divulge that she had received the nickname for her good looks.

"Why didn't you mention all this to me before?" asked Paula.

"Because you're such a Socialist that I was afraid of your setting the house on fire, if you knew it," answered Mirabel sweetly.

"Mirabel," said Paula, penitently, "I'm not half such a Socialist as you are—keeping all this dark for all the years that I've known you, and being so absolutely unaffected by it! But I'll tell you one thing—I don't think you ought to let that Oliver Gray come round here every Sunday. It isn't good enough for a woman of your position—perhaps I should say of your family—to allow your name to be connected with a man like that."

"My dear, I couldn't think of altering my attitude to him! Just think of all he's done for me! If he hadn't made me his leading lady, I should never have risen beyond 'walking-on,' or at the utmost, getting a part like one of what Archie calls 'the Queen's Lizzies'!"

"The Queen's Lizzies!" cried Paula, going off into peals of laughter—"to use a vulgar expression, I could 'eat my hat!' But, Mirabel . . ."

"What, dear?"—the "Queen's Lizzies" had restored the harmony of the household.

"A most serious thought has just struck me. I see quite clearly now why that man Gray pays you so much attention, and pretends to have reformed. Of course he wants to marry you for your chance of a title."

"There isn't much chance, is there, with that healthy young cub of an Archie in between? Another thing—he does not know that I have the faintest connection with any Peer."

"Well, it would be a great match for him, in point of family, even if you never did succeed to the title, and I shouldn't

think that there were many people fonder of risking their necks than Lord Avondale."

Mirabel felt quite sick. Now that Paula had said it, she could picture that boy dying in his boots, somehow, before the silky down on his upper lip had given way to a moustache.

" You needn't be frightened ; I shall never marry Mr. Gray," said Mirabel. " But that doesn't prevent me from being as decent to him as I can, considering all I owe to him."

Paula was distinctly relieved. " You should marry your cousin, and then you'd be Countess of Douglas anyhow, some day," said Paula, quite sincerely. She had forgotten all her Socialism in a glowing dream for Mirabel's future. Even before she had any idea of the splendour of Mirabel's family, she had been as anxious as if she had been her mother that she should make a marriage worthy of her beauty and her success. Gray's suit she had advocated for professional reasons.

Mirabel shuddered. Knowing Paula, she knew that she would have Satan at her side night and day, ready to insinuate the idea which she was trying to banish from her thoughts. But for that fatal marriage, there was nothing which she would so have desired as to marry this boy, even if it meant cutting off both of them from the title and every penny that appertained to it. She did not want him for worldly advantages. She wanted him because she had found that ideal husband of her dreams. She admitted his faults ; she admitted his vices. But she felt that they would all cease in his love for her.

She did not see that the same process of reasoning was exactly as applicable to Oliver Gray. She knew that Archie was not particularly clever. She could not tell herself that he had shown any desire to fulfil any useful purpose in life. He was just the most delightful human being she had met.

And that was her notion of an ideal husband !

CHAPTER XXI

ENTER THE COUNTESS OF DOUGLAS

THE next day supplied another instance of the wisdom of the serpent with which Archie's recklessness was streaked. Perceiving that Mirabel did not intend to face the

perils of a *tête-à-tête* tea, he thought that he might just as well reinforce his suit in another way.

Lanarkshire House stood on the Kensington Road, just before you reach Knightsbridge. It was one of the two old country-houses which had survived from the days when Kensington was a village. With its fine red brick façade it was more ambitious than its neighbour, Kingston House. It was more like the noblemen's villas scattered round Petersham. It was rather far out for a nobleman's house, but Lady Douglas liked it because it had larger rooms for entertaining, and regular grounds for garden-parties, and her hobby in life was to have a *salon*. It was also easier for her, as her son said, to "go as you please" on the Kensington Road than in Grosvenor Square. It was certainly not easy for her to lead the life of a great lady, with a husband who would not live at home, and, when she gave a dinner-party, had to be asked like the other guests, and came and went like the other guests. So she started the idea of having a *salon* on Sunday nights, which in summer began with a garden-reception on Sunday afternoons, and engaged a badly-off niece of hers, Mollie Menteith, who was very plain, but had a nice figure, and charming eyes and teeth, at a liberal salary to attend to the correspondence which it involved, and do the hard work at the receptions.

There was plenty of money at her disposal, since part of the Lanarkshire coal-fields lay under the immemorial estates of her husband. And as she was popular with her own order, she was able to have irresistible *salons*, in which such of the nobility as cared for it could meet the people who were famous in the Arts, and people connected with the Arts could have a taste of high Society. These *salons* had the further advantage of inviting the occasional attendance of her husband and her son, theatrical society being almost the only taste which all three possessed in common.

She was the daughter of a Scottish peer, of the old-fashioned sort, who prefer having their town residence in the ancient capital of their country, instead of in London. Living in Edinburgh, her parents had moved in the brilliant literary and legal set who reigned in Edinburgh in the middle generation of the last century. Not much of their literary product has any vogue to-day, but the conversation at their gatherings was prodigiously witty and learned, and had inspired her with

an hereditary taste for *salons*, which asserted itself now that she was thrown so much on her own resources. The pity of it was that she had no really cultivated tastes herself, beyond an insatiable hunger for brilliant conversation. She chose her new friends partly for that, and partly for notoriety, these being the two qualities which attracted her friends in her own order most.

But the system was a bad one, and though it made the Sunday evenings brilliant and enjoyable, the stream of small celebrities who invaded the house all through the week rendered its atmosphere intolerable to Lord Douglas, who, since he had grown tired of sport, had given himself up to public movements. He came to his wife's parties for the same reason as he would have gone to Oliver Gray's parties—on the off-chance of picking up an acquaintance which would amuse him. And they had drifted so far apart that it gave her actual pleasure when she could provide him with such amusement. They were excellent friends, but she had no time to participate in his serious interests and occupations.

London was such a much larger place than Edinburgh, and had such an immensely larger crowd of great people and clever people, that she was able to gather a *salon* round her, which took up her entire interest. To be the head of that, and made a fuss of by everybody who attended it, gratified every desire and ambition which she had. She was still a lovely woman, and her hair had retained its colour, and her figure the dignity of its youth. It was easy to see where her son had inherited his beauty. But the expression, which was its crowning charm, and sometimes sat rather oddly on such an uncompromising young "ragger," came from Lord Douglas.

Lady Douglas was devoted to her son, and he was devoted to her, but "couldn't stick the crowd"—to use his elegant summarization of the most brilliant people in London. When he did come home he patiently allowed his mother to make as much of him as she liked. But he did not repeat the dose very frequently.

It was therefore a surprise when Grainger, her butler, who answered the telephones, came to her and said, "Lord Avondale has telephoned that he is on his way to see you, my Lady."

A quarter of an hour later he was shown into the small drawing-room, where she had tea if she did not expect a party. After a fervent embrace, to which he not only submitted, but

reciprocated with endearing monkey-tricks, she said, "Have you had your tea, Archie?"

"I'll have another," he said. "What I like about your house, mater, is that you always have party-food going, though I can't make out why you do it for that rotten crowd!"

"You must remember that they're not all what you'd call rotten, Archie."

"Oh, yes, they are! I know what you mean, but the others are rotten, too, to put up with such people! People with brains are such bores; they always want to talk like *The Times*!"

"I don't know why you say that, dear; I'm sure you don't read *The Times*!"

"Only *The Sporting Times*, old thing; but I know they do. Are you hard up for something to brighten up your old parties?"

She knew what was coming, and to what she was indebted for the honour of his visit, now. There was no finessing about Archie, unless he was trying to cajole a pretty woman.

"Why?" she asked, with an amused smile. "Have you made a new discovery?"

"Well, rather, and I was so anxious to give you the benefit of it that I taxied to the nearest public telephone, and rang Ginger up to know if you were at home!"

"Grainger, Archie—you really mustn't call him *Ginger*! He'll catch you some day, and I shall lose the only person who knows all my friends."

"Don't fret your . . . don't fret yourself about that, mater—it won't do you any good! I always call him *Ginger* to his face, except when I'm in your presence."

Lady Douglas closed her eyes in horror at the thought of the majestic Grainger being exposed to such insults. Her son, who was keeping all the fire off her by standing in front of it, with his hands in his jacket pockets, said: "You don't seem dying to hear about my new discovery; you're thinking more of poor old Ginger's feelings!"

"I'm so sorry, dear, but I really have to depend on him so much more than I have to depend upon your father."

Archie took his hands out of his pockets to stuff his handkerchief into his mouth. The thought of comparing his father, who was one of the noblest figures in the House of

Lords—when he went there—with a bloated toast-master like Grainger, quite overcame him.

His mother was so upset that to change the subject she said, rather pettishly : “ Well, who is your new discovery, Archie ? ” His discoveries were always human, and always of the same sex.

“ You’ve got a cousin who’s a leading lady ! ”

“ A leading lady ? ” She was still so upset that she did not for the moment remember what a leading lady was.

“ Yes, a leading lady at a theatre.”

She braced herself together at this piece of intelligence ; she was so excited. “ Who is she ? Have I ever seen her ? Has she ever been here without my knowing the relationship ? ”

“ Well, I can’t say if you’ve ever seen her, because I’m not with you every minute of the day, mater dear. But I don’t think she comes here, or . . . ”

“ I should see you oftener ? I quite understand.”

“ Well . . . I shouldn’t like to say that.”

“ I won’t scold ; for a man who has so much to do as you have, you’re really not bad about coming to see your mother.”

He pulled a face. “ A man who has as much to do as I have ! ”

“ Well, do you think I should have seen her ? ”

“ Not in the theatre, because I go there every night, and I always take a look round the boxes.”

“ Oh, my poor boy, you must be hard hit ! Let me see if she is possible, at once ! ”

“ Of course she’s possible ; she’s a Douglas.”

“ What theatre did you say it was ? ”

“ *The Babylon.* ”

Lady Douglas gasped. She was fairly broad-viewed as to the people she asked to her house, but she had never gone to musical comedy, or the music-halls yet, in her lion-hunts. “ Do you think I *can* do it, Archie ? ”

“ Of course I do ! Didn’t I tell you that she was a Douglas ? ”

“ Yes, I know you did, and I know that *Forward** has

* Some of the descendants of the good Sir James Douglas used their motto in its French form, “ *Jamais arrière*, ” and some in its English form, “ *Forward*. ”

always been the motto of our family since the Scotch began to use English ! But this might be a little bit too *forward* for some of our own friends. She must have been pretty *forward* before she got there ! ”

“ You don’t know her, mater.”

“ I’ve noticed, Archie, that I’ve generally been rather glad not to have known the people about whom you have said that ! Besides, how do you know that she really is our cousin ? ” she proceeded, seeing that he did not look so disturbed as he usually did when they were having this form of conversation. “ There are lots of Douglasses in the world—there are various Peers, not to mention the rest. And if a woman like that is related to one of the families, she’d be sure to think it was ours, because we’re the best known. But I don’t suppose she’s got anything to do with any of them. If a woman like that . . . ”

“ Mother, I must ask you not to use that expression again about her ; it’s offensive to me ! ”

Lady Douglas smiled indulgently—Archie had given her many lectures of this sort—and corrected herself. “ If this Miss Douglas’s name really is Douglas, and has not been adopted as a stage name, she’d be sure to say that she belongs to one of the families.”

“ Mater ! ” he said warningly.

She felt it her duty to proceed : “ But the odds are that her name isn’t Douglas at all, and . . . ”

“ But she’s in the ‘ Peerage,’ mater.”

“ Oh, that alters the case,” said Lady Douglas. “ Who is she ? ”

“ The daughter of my grand-governor’s brother Archibald, who went to live in Italy and was never heard of again.”

Lady Douglas reminded herself that this Isabel was an important person because, if anything happened to her beloved Archie, there would be only this girl left to carry on the title in their branch of the family. What she said to her son was : “ Does she act under her own name ? ”

“ Douglas ; but she uses a pet name, Mirabel, instead of her own name, Isabel.”

“ Isabel ? Yes, that’s right,” said Lady Douglas. “ Her name should be Isabel. And if she’s at all what you say, only think of the draw she will be for my parties ! I must look into the matter at once. I’ll go and see her to-morrow ! ”

"I'm going to see her to-morrow, mater."

"Well, I knew that—at least, I felt sure of it. Does that mean that I am not wanted?"

"No, but . . . but . . ."

"What's the matter, Archie? It isn't like you to hesitate about giving your opinion!"

"The fact of the matter is, mater, that she promised that if I'd call for her about three, she'd take me for a spin into the country in her car."

"And you don't want to waste any of the precious minutes? Well, I'll do my call before three. By the bye, where does your charmer live?"

"Bolingbroke House, The Mall."

"The Mall?" repeated Lady Douglas tentatively.

"Yes; I don't know whether it's Hammersmith or Chiswick, but I know that you have to go along King Street, Hammersmith, till you come to the—I can't pronounce the name of that road, but I've got it written down in my cigarette-case—and then turn down sharp to the left till you come to the river-bank. And there it is!"

"Nice house?" she asked, while he was picking one of his own cards, on which he had written Mirabel's address, out of his gold cigarette-case.

"Not much worse than this." He disliked his mother living in Kensington. Personally he would have thought it more decent to live in a house only a quarter of the size in Mayfair. "Here it is, mater."

She spelt it out. "W-e-l-t-j-e Road—what language is that, I wonder?"

"I think it must be *Jerry*," he said, "invented by the builder. Well, mater, you will ask her, won't you?"

"I will, if she's possible, and as you say she is . . . everything that is all right, of course I shall!"

Archie hated *ifs*. He liked to have his own way there and then. He wanted to nail his mother to it. So, knowing her love of novelties and excitement, he determined to try and capture her by a *coup de main*.

"Mater," he said, "would you like to go on the real *razzle* to-night?"

"Certainly not! What do you mean to imply by that dreadful word?"

"I mean, should you like to pick me up at the barracks at

six fifty-five, and let me give you dinner in the *Babylon Restaurant*, and then trot round and see Mirabel in her piece ? Then you can form your own conclusions."

The idea appealed to Lady Douglas enormously. To dine at a rather *outré* restaurant with her own son, who would certainly be able to tell her about everybody as much as she could permit herself to hear, sounded delightful. For one thing, he had never encouraged her to go to any of his haunts before. As to food—she loved good food, and could eat bad food without any inconvenience to herself, if she was sufficiently amused. And it would enable her to form a deliberate opinion of Mirabel before she had to speak to her.

"Oh, Archie, what fun ! But remember one thing, dear—I should hate to see anything I oughtn't to ! "

"Bless you !" he said, "the *Babylon's* quite a strict place ; that old Italian ruffian—I forget his name—is running it against Prince's."

"Very well, then, I'll call for you at five minutes to seven."

"Don't be late, will you, mater ? I don't want to miss any of the piece."

She arrived a few minutes before she was due, and found him ready.

"Wonders will never cease !" she said. "I shouldn't have believed that you could have dined at seven, and been in time for your dinner ! Do you do this every night ? "

"No, not every night, but whenever I've no other engagement. I look in at my stall every night."

"Have you got one by the season ?" she asked, thinking that she was being sarcastic.

He nodded.

"My gracious !" she said. "What funny things men are ! "

"What a capital place it is for food," she said, when they came to their coffee. Certainly, he had given her the best dinner the place could produce ; he had telephoned to Viviani as soon as he got to the barracks, to order a table for two and "a dinner." Signor Viviani, and other people, too, wondered very much who the charming society woman was who was willing to be seen dining with Lord Avondale at the *Babylon*. He seemed very fond of her, at any rate, they thought, and she of him, but elderly ladies do get foolish over a b-h-o-y like him.

At ten minutes to eight he said : "Now then, mater, we

must be shifting. I 'phoned to the box-office to get my stall changed so as to get another one beside it for you, and there may be a crowd round the peep-hole."

She drew her cloak closer round her shoulders and rose directly. She knew of what vital importance it was to him not to lose one minute of the new *inamorata*.

" You settle, Archie, and let me know what it comes to."

" Not a bit, mater! This is my show . . . besides, I shan't pay it—they'll put it down to my account."

He certainly was very much at home here.

When they got into the booking-hall, where a long queue was waiting to buy tickets, an attendant came up to him and gave him his tickets, and got a two-shilling piece or half-a-crown—she did not notice which—for saving him having to wait his turn.

" Have you got an account here, too, Archie ? "

" Yes, of course—they know me. I've paid up my own stall for the season."

CHAPTER XXII

WHAT LADY DOUGLAS THOUGHT OF MIRABEL

THEIR seats were rather far back. They had only been able to get them because two had been returned the moment before he telephoned. The *Babylon* was a great stalls' theatre, because of the signalling which went on between the stage and the admirers.

The curtain rose almost immediately, on Queen Mary's people, represented by the famous *Babylon* Beauty Chorus and the minor comedians. Being Scotch, Lady Douglas hardly noticed them; she was too intent on trying to find mistakes in the representation of her native Edinburgh in the scenery. She was rapturous over its beauty, and the admiration it was exciting in the English people all round her; but that did not prevent her from pointing out to her son that they were seeing a number of Edinburgh buildings at the same time in London which they could not possibly see at the same time in Edinburgh—except on the stage.

" Oliver Gray is never mean, mater; he likes to give people as much for their money as he can."

" And who is Oliver Gray ? "

"The chap who owns and runs the place, and wants to own and run Mirabel as well!"

"Oh, Archie, you mustn't say such terrible things to your mother!"

Archie, who saw how hurt she was by what she thought his disrespect, said quickly: "No, I don't mean that, mater—I wouldn't say a thing like that to you! It's all O K; he's my hated rival for her hand. He's behaving like a white man to her. But I just wish he'd stop it!"

Lady Douglas smiled in spite of herself. "Stop behaving decently to her, Archie?"

"Stop behaving at all! He ought to see that he isn't wanted!" He did not know how much he was speaking by the book.

By this time Hughie Sprot and Topsy Perks and the more important comedians had arrived, and for a quarter of an hour kept the audience convulsed with laughter by behaving much as the clown and pantaloon in a harlequinade would behave, if they waylaid a vanload of mediaeval clothes and armour on its way back from a theatre to Wardour Street. The audience rocked with laughter, and had to be recalled, by a gorgeous pageant, to a proper state of mind for receiving the tragic Queen of Scots, particularly since she made her appearance as a widow, attended by John Knox and the Regent.

Archie drew her attention, with one of the little gestures which women in love with him found so irresistible. The people who knew him by sight wondered at her again.

After a regular transformation scene of the nobles, Highlanders, Lowlanders and Mosstroopers, a splendid piece of historical realism, the Queen's Maries debouched on to the stage, doubling the enthusiasm of the audience at one bound.

"There are the Lizzies," said Archie. "Now she won't be long. The one whose face looks like an accident is Orlando Jebb's wife. You know that ass Jebb, I suppose, mater?"

"If he's Lady Lampeter's son, I know who he is; but Lady Lampeter does not come to my parties; she makes no distinctions between them and places like this. We are all brands for the burning."

"How cheery for Jebb!" said Archie. "But, d'you know, Betty—that's his wife—wants to get in with them. She'd leave the stage to-morrow, if they'd take her up!"

There was another blare of music, and Mirabel rode on to the stage with the Regent leading her white palfrey, and John Knox, looking as if he had just come from church, on her other side.

There was a storm of applause from the retainers and the chorus and the comedians, and her subjects on the other side of Jordan—the first three or four rows of the stalls being almost exclusively men. *Babylon* stage conventions demanded that she should acknowledge the salutations of the audience first, before she took any notice of the people in the play, though she was a monarch meeting the nation over which she ruled for the first time.

When Mirabel came forward to the footlights, with the diffidence which she had been unable to get over at finding herself suddenly in a position of such prominence, and as the applause restored her confidence, broke into the smile with which an Italian woman greets her lover, Lady Douglas felt immensely attracted to her. And this was enhanced when she sang a song with charming music and showed that she had the voice and the sympathy which would have raised her to the top of the tree in ballad concerts.

"If it's only one of your escapades, Archie, you must not ask me to help you! If I did anything, it would be to try and keep her out of it. It's not the same thing as it was, when I had to refuse other girls, whom you've wanted me to invite. They wanted social recognition as their price for what ought to keep them out of any decent society. I had no mission to protect them: they were only too capable of looking after themselves. But this girl's a good woman, besides being our own kith and kin."

"Mater," he said, "you mustn't open your mouth so wide to your little son! I'm taking this hand as a plaster-saint!"

"We shall see," she said. She had not much faith in Archie on the side of the angels.

With the piece she was ineffably bored. It was worse than boring to her—it was blasphemy! She had been brought up to regard Edinburgh and its traditions, and Scottish history, as something sacred. Ordinarily the English were quite good people, as one's associates in a luxurious and sporting life, but at the back of it all, a pure-blooded Scotswoman like herself was bound to regard the union of Scotland with England as something only less monstrous than the triple partition of

Poland. Therefore it was appalling to her to see one of the most romantic episodes in the history of Scotland turned into a vulgar and silly pantomime. She would not even look at the comedians, whose antics were received with such shouts of laughter by the audience, or the Beauty Chorus, who smiled on the four rows of black-coated Archies in the stalls.

She looked from her son to Mirabel, and from Mirabel to her son. Except as a very lovely woman and a nice woman, Mirabel did not impress her in the first act. In truth, all Mirabel had to do was to be a spectator of the buffooneries of the comedians, great and small, making a travesty of ancient Scottish sports and customs—blasphemy again. And the worst of it was that Mirabel, being near enough to catch Hughie Sprot's asides, which were intensely funny, wore an honest smile of amusement. Lady Douglas, up in arms for Scotland, thought her a fool, though she forgave her a little when she sang again, a song which gave her more chance, and showed that she had a really glorious voice.

Disappointed with Mirabel, she leant back and watched her son. His eyes were feeding on everything which Mirabel did. They were glued to her. The gods in the front rows of the stalls do not use glasses. Glasses cut you off from any possible fun which may break out in an unexpected quarter ; they interfere with the signalling from the stage. And a great many of these gods—not the soldiers, perhaps—like to feel that the audience is looking at them, and pointing them out as *b-h-o-y-s*.

Therefore, Lord Avondale was not using glasses, and his proud mother could not help thinking what a Cupid he looked now that he had found a Psyche.

Of course she had never read Apuleius ; she would never have heard of Psyche, though she might have heard of Cupid, if Génée had not appeared in *Cupid and Psyche* at the *Coliscum*.

The more she looked at her son, the more convinced she was that he was in love. An ordinary mother might have found even this prospect appalling. But Archie was so headstrong, because she had spoilt him so, that she had already begun to regard it as a miracle if he did not marry somebody quite dreadful—not a woman like Mrs. Jebb, even, but one of the girls in the Chorus, with a soul like a cinema. Therefore she would be glad if he laid his heart on the altar of

Mirabel, though she might be gladder still if the sacrifice was not accepted. And even if it were that voice would make up for many shortcomings. When she sang for the third time and was encored and encored as she had been in the two previous songs, Lady Douglas was no longer surprised at her popularity with the audience and Archie.

"What do you think of her, mother?" asked Archie eagerly, when the curtain fell.

"I think she's quite nice and very lovely, and has a simply wonderful voice; and I'm perfectly willing to ask her to the house—in fact, it is right that she should meet your father, as head of the family."

Under ordinary circumstances, Archie would have had a retort ready for this about it being the first perquisite which had ever been attached to the post. But matters were too serious for jesting. Homage of all sorts was to be laid at Mirabel's feet. His father had a duty to perform.

"Hasn't she a wonderful voice, mater?"

"Perfectly wonderful—far the best that I ever heard in this sort of piece."

"And don't you think she's an awfully good actress, mater?" said the admirer.

"No, honestly, I don't." Lady Douglas had not forgiven her for laughing (as she thought) at the comedians' outrages upon Scotland.

"Well, you wait, and see her in the love-scenes! She's fine in them!"

"Does she make love so beautifully, then?"

"She doesn't make it at all: she lets those bounders know what she thinks of them!"

Lady Douglas was not impressed. She gathered that the course of the play was agreeable to his feelings as a lover of Mirabel, and that she would be much the same ladylike and good-looking dummy with a voice that she had been in the first act.

But as the second act progressed, she saw that her estimate of Mirabel's power as an actress was quite wrong. Mirabel's attitude to Rizzio, the man who had her heart (in the play): the tact and queenliness she showed in her reception of the two unwelcome love-suits, developing into impatience and scorn as the one who had no right to make love to her at all made proposals which he had no right to make to any woman,

and developing into a premonition of evil as the other, who had a right to offer his love, offered it, half perfunctorily, half with ill-concealed exultation, showed her to be a woman who looked for her highest happiness in life to marriage, and resented that affairs of State should be allowed to interfere with a sacrament.

This time Lady Douglas kept her eyes on the stage, except for an occasional glance at her son, to assure herself that he was still wrapped up in the worship of his divinity, which she did when the comedians were interpolating their silly "business."

When the curtain fell upon the second act, Archie turned to his mother with his grand air.

"Well, mater, do you still think she can't act?"

"No, I don't, dear: I think she's an extremely good actress, and I'm sorry to see her frittering her talents on a piece like this. But if she's not good enough for grand opera, and has a voice like this, I suppose it is better for her to go in for musical comedy, instead of mincing up the steps at the Albert Hall to give two ballads and two encores in the course of a long afternoon! Why is there nothing between the drivel of the opera above and the drivel of musical comedy below?"

"Drivel of the opera's good, mater—I'm there with you—though I don't agree with you about the other thing. There'd be nothing to do, except gamble, after dinner, if it wasn't for places like the *Babylon*."

The word "gamble" made his mother shudder. Lord Avondale, aged twenty, was a great deal too fond of gambling-places already, and that might spell real disaster some day, because most of the flats he went to were places where you do not stand a dog's chance of an honest run for your money.

"Doesn't she sing ripplingly, mater?"

"She does, indeed," said his mother, but it was doubtful if either of them recognized the greatest charm of her singing, which was that she sang so easily that she could be her natural self—or was it very finished acting—all the time?

But more important than the change in her opinions of Mirabel's powers as an actress, was the change in her maternal feelings. She began to think that it would be rather a good thing if Archie was to marry Mirabel. She showed such womanly tact in managing Chastelard and Darnley on the

stage, that she must have tact in ordinary life. That is what Lady Douglas thought, without sufficient premises. It is well known that some of the women who are most womanly behind the footlights are perfect fiends in their own homes, and that some men, who are the very souls of honour in the pieces which they generally play, are dirty scoundrels in everyday life.

Yes, she told herself, Mirabel would be able to manage Archie, and she would have the better chance because he would be doing what she, his mother, had always expected him to do—marrying a beauty of the musical-comedy stage, whose fame was in everybody's mouth. Anything else was too tame for him.

There was this also: even if—and she could not believe it—Mirabel was not a ladylike girl naturally, in her own surroundings, at any rate she knew how to counterfeit it so well on the stage that she could certainly counterfeit it in Society, when there was occasion for her to do so.

And thirdly, she had an instinctive liking for the girl. If she was as nice and good as she seemed, she would take her for a daughter gladly.

Nor was Lady Douglas, who was intensely Scotch in her clannishness and love of family, indifferent to the fact that Mirabel was her husband's first cousin, and the next heir to the title after Archie. On the stage she would be very likely to have undesirable people running after her if her relationship to the Douglas title became known, and it would be a good thing for her sake to have her safely married to the heir. Lady Douglas felt compelled to throw in this as a sop to her conscience. Up to this she had only been thinking of Archie. Archie was heir to the ancient earldom of Douglas, as famous a title as any in the Aristocracies of Europe, and a very wealthy one, and he was as beautiful as an angel—if you could make such a transparently absurd comparison.

But Archie's record of dissipation was a formidable one for a boy of twenty, and on the other side the Recording Angel had no entries to make, though he was a darling, chivalrous, fearless, British boy.

On the balance, the match seemed a fair one. She reciprocated Archie's advances to a degree which astonished him.

The third act was a vapid affair as it was written. The

Regent and Morton, and other great Scotch lords, whether they had anything to do with the affair in history or not, urged her, in the style of the heavy fathers and uncles of farce, to marry Darnley for their country's good, and she, in a series of carefully-graded songs, passed from freely expressed distaste to the policy of submission. With Mirabel's interpretation you really appreciated the sacrifice she was making in submitting to a marriage she detested. At moments she was almost tragic. And when she had resolved, after a bitter struggle with herself, to make the sacrifice, you could see her wringing from herself the affection which she considered due to her bridegroom, worthless and ill-conditioned though he was.

Certainly the tragic note seemed to increase the depth and feeling of her singing. Superior people might say that it was only ballad-sentiment, but the fact remained that she contrived to invest a dull and banal act with some human reality and interest. When the curtain fell on the Royal wedding, and the audience called for her again and again, and she came forward, with her face transfigured with pride and delight, Lady Douglas felt that life would be an empty thing henceforth if she could not have this radiant creature for her daughter. She had forgotten all about the marriage being partly for Archie's sake, and, partly, for Mirabel's sake. She wanted it for her own sake now. It would be the apex to what she honestly believed she had done for the Arts and Literature in the Southern Metropolis.

"Can't we go and see her now, Archie?" said his mother enthusiastically.

Archie, remembering the course of true love on the previous night, declared that it was impossible. His experience of Green-Room escapades told him that even if Mirabel would condone the invasion, the manager certainly would not, and that the attendants would resist him *vi et armis*. He would not have been surprised to have been stopped by sentries with fixed bayonets.

Besides, Archie, who was very *rusé* in trying to capture theatrical maidens by *coups de main*, reflected that the presence of his mother would be a positive disadvantage. Nobody would believe that she was his mother; they would think that she was some naughty Society lady whom he had brought with him, to counterfeit his mother, for the purpose

of a fresh invasion, and that this was the explanation of his dining at the *Babylon Restaurant* with such a companion. He positively gasped at the suspicions to which his mother might be subjected. Indeed, if he had not been so fond of her, it would have been like his impish temperament to have encouraged her in the idea in order to see the fun.

Between eleven and twelve, p.m., he was dangerously fond of practical joking.

Instead of this he completed the joy of her evening by giving her supper at a night-club, where the attendants wondered what he was up to in bringing a lady of her age to the club, and going away before the high play began.

The conversation was of Mirabel, Mirabel, Mirabel, interrupted by irrelevant enquiries from Lady Douglas, who was not too excited about the play to have a lively interest in the people at the club and their doings.

"Aren't you coming upstairs, Archie?" said the elaborate individual who ran the club, as he was getting his mother's cloak, and his hat and stick.

"No, old chap," said Archie. "I've just been giving my mother a bit of something to eat."

The individual wondered what the gigantic game, which Archie had on, was. There must be something worthy of such a combination!

When his mother left him at the barracks, he felt quite thankful himself that he had not achieved anything beyond getting a promise out of her that she would go and make friends with Mirabel, and that she would go at some hour which would not interfere with his own plans.

CHAPTER XXIII

LADY DOUGLAS AT BOLINGBROKE HOUSE

AT lunch the next day Paula, who, excited as she was about Mirabel marrying Archie, could not resist the fascination of giving little digs, said, "I suppose that boy's coming to see you again this afternoon?"

"Yes," said Mirabel, "he is. He's going with me, when I take my drive."

"My dear child, how very unwise you are! I've no

reason to doubt your statement that you are Isabel Douglas, and consequently his first cousin once removed. But that isn't why he's coming to see you. He's coming to see you because you are the leading lady, and one of the pretty women, of the theatre where he and his foolish friends go to hurry on the doom of his Order by outraging the ideas of all social reformers. As you very wisely keep yourself out of the detestable fast life of the theatre, he is just using his cousinship as a means of getting at you. Of course, if you have any idea of marrying him"—she saw Mirabel wince, and put it down to her cleverness in detecting Mirabel's ambitions—"it's a different matter! But if you're not, you ought to put your foot down and tell him that you're not going to have him coming here."

"Paula," Mirabel said, with spirit, "I must remind you that this is my house, and that I intend to have my cousin here if I choose."

"I know that you have the right, and I am willing to be of any service I can in chaperoning you, if you do have him here. But, think, Mirabel . . . this boy likes coming here because you're rather pretty"—Paula was never guilty of undue flattery—"and it will doubtless give him prestige with the other naughty boys of his regiment to be seen going about with the leading lady of the *Babylon*, who has so resolutely declined to be known by the Johnnies who hang about the theatre. And you're both of you very young."

Mirabel disliked the imputation which she put into the word "young."

"Nobody minds being that if they're old enough to have left school," she said.

"I suppose that's a dig for me?"

"Oh, no, not at all—it's only saying what I feel!"

Paula felt the snub, and proceeded: "But what I want to know is: what will his father and mother have to say to you? I forgot—you know his father—and anyhow, Earls will be Earls!" she added, her Socialistic instincts getting the better of her. "But his mother—I shall very much like to see what she will do."

"The odds are that she will altogether disapprove of me," said Mirabel. "She will think that I have disgraced the family, and, if not that, that I am the thin end of the wedge."

"I don't understand you."

"Well, I won't explain. In any case, I don't understand the point of cutting myself off from the only member of my family whom I really want to see, because they won't all accept me."

"I should have more pride," said Paula.

"Why are Socialists such sticklers for etiquette?" asked Mirabel.

Paula was nettled. "It isn't etiquette," she said, "it's decency"

"Decency is a matter of behaviour," answered Mirabel, unruffled.

"He's a dear boy," said Paula, changing her tactics, "but far too good-looking, if you are not going to marry him!"

One of Mirabel's rebellious blushes put her at a decided disadvantage, but Paula put the wrong interpretation upon it, and proceeded:

"And he hasn't the reputation of being a saint!"

"Then you must be assiduous in your precautions, Paula. They will be very welcome. I can assure you that I am most anxious that no foolishness on his part should deprive me of a jolly friendship."

Paula was not to be satisfied. "Flint and steel," she said, "are kept in the same case, but they only want knocking together to produce a fire." She thought this metaphor such a good one that she caught up a pencil and notebook which hung in a silver case from her belt to write it down for her next book. When she looked up Mirabel had gone.

It was high-minded of Paula to sternly resist the admission of Lord Avondale into the Castle in the Wood, though it may have been due to a censorious spirit; for she herself felt irresistibly attracted to him—it must be confessed, for his reputation as much as for his beauty. She was a born old-maid, if ever there was one, but the study of the social evil was more fascinating than any other to her. It was a crusade against that which had made her a Socialist, and she was drawn into the crusade because it was her only chance of contact with the subject. Hitherto, her acquaintance with it had all been in refuge-work, where discipline was the lot of the victims, and denunciation was justly

militant against the aggressors, whom the lady workers never saw unless they happened to belong to the working-classes.

It was therefore intensely interesting to her to meet one of the wicked Guardsmen who had so often adorned her eloquence, added to which, though she was an ardent Socialist and untouched by any sex-feelings, she loved the society of the beautiful and well-born.

Therefore, as she knew that Lord Avondale was coming shortly, she went up into the drawing-room to see if the flowers were exactly as she should like them—just as if he would criticize chrysanthemums, when Mirabel was there.

Mirabel, of course, was dressing to go out with him. As she had not reappeared when the front-door bell rang, Paula thought she would stay in the drawing-room and receive him herself. The idea gave her a good deal of pleasure.

But when the door opened, it was a woman, not a man, and Jeffreys announced : “Lady Douglas.”

Paula saw a woman still lovely, though she had a son twenty years old. Lady Douglas had Archic’s beauty of feature, and her face in repose had the dignity which belonged to her state in life. She had gentle violet eyes, and a gentle smile, which made her popular with high and low. But, when she laughed, you saw the weakness of her face, and knew why she did not show more selectiveness in her *salon*.

There was no doubt about her being Lord Avondale’s mother. He would have been her living image if it had not been for the honest manliness which tempered his recklessness and his boyish beauty, when he was not escapading. Those serious eyes, however, were lacking in her face, which was not overburdened with character, though she posed as the Egeria of a *salon*. Her loveliness had one superlative charm: except when she was meeting people of her own order, her face showed a certain timidity, and her affability was sincere. She liked interesting people of every kind; anyone who would have been welcome in the Edinburgh gatherings of her youth was welcome at Lanarkshire House.

She looked rather surprised at finding Paula, not Mirabel, there, but advanced to shake hands.

“I am Miss Maitland,” Paula began to explain.

“Paula Maitland, the novelist?” said Lady Douglas, who hardly ever read a book, though she bought the books

of the authors who came to her house. But one book she did read—"Who's Who"—because it told her whom she ought to try and get to her parties, and made her an ideal hostess in introductions.

"Yes, Paula Maitland."

"I was just going to get your book about Mary, Queen of Scots—I've forgotten its exact title."

"I've written two," said Paula, "but I think you must mean 'The Lady of Lochleven'?"

"Yes, that's it," said Lady Douglas, not knowing or caring in the least. "If you'll give me a postcard I'll write an order to my bookseller for it now, then I shan't forget which of the two it is. Going to see my cousin in the play last night reminded me that I'd never read your book."

This was Lady Douglas's favourite form of white lie; she used it with the necessary variations several hundred times a year.

"I have a great many books about Mary, Queen of Scots, at Lanarkshire House, Miss Maitland. I hope you'll give me the pleasure of your coming to see them."

It was her habit to ask every well-known author or artist, whom she met, to come to her house; the numbers did not signify: it was very roomy. But Paula did not know this, so her Socialism received a damaging blow.

"Are you staying with Miss Douglas?" asked Lady Douglas, since Paula had no hat on, and seemed very much at home.

"I live with her," said Paula. "I have no home, and she's lonely."

Lady Douglas gave a smile of pleasure, which was polite to Paula, and an outward and visible sign of the satisfaction she felt at this fresh proof of Mirabel's respectability.

"I'm glad of that," she said, "I don't approve of bachelor-girls living alone." And she added, as a sort of explanation, "Miss Douglas is Lord Douglas's cousin, you know, so we are naturally rather anxious about her, in the difficult position in which she is placed."

Neither woman understood the biting irony of the situation. Lady Douglas might never have known that Mirabel Douglas was the Isabel Douglas of the succession, if it had not been for her graceless son's repeated attempts to force

himself upon her, as one of the beauties of the *Babylon Theatre*. And Paula knew nothing of what had happened at the *Babylon*, and imagined that Lord Avondale had come to see Mirabel because he had read about her in the newspapers, and thought her pretty from his stall in the theatre. It was enough to make the gods laugh.

At this moment Mirabel came in. It was still a few minutes before three. She was very shy. She felt sure that Lady Douglas had come under protest because her spoilt son had badgered her into it. But she was prepared to show her spirit if there was the least trace of this in Lady Douglas's demeanour. She had not sought her relatives when she came to England, and she did not intend to be patronized by them.

But when she advanced to shake hands, Lady Douglas bent forward, and gave her an honest cousinly kiss.

"My dear, why didn't you let me know when you came to England? You might have stayed at Lanarkshire House till you were settled!"

"Oh, I shouldn't have liked to take advantage of you like that! Besides, think of the humour of the situation—a student going in the bus to the Lyceum . . ."

Lady Douglas looked puzzled.

"The Royal Lyceum of Music, I mean—not the theatre—every day, from a house like yours!"

"I should not have minded, my dear. Besides, my house is very handy for the bus—it's on the main road, though of course I should always have sent you there in one of my cars."

This picture appeared still more out of drawing to Mirabel. Her heart fell twenty degrees when Lady Douglas, as her next politeness, asked, "I daresay you've seen a lot of Jim"—Jim was Lord Douglas. "He hasn't mentioned it to me, but he's such a detached person that I often don't hear of what he is doing till I see it in the newspapers! You see, his latest craze is the Daylight-Saving Bill, which is a very awkward thing to have in the house with you." It certainly was difficult to picture her majestic butler trying to save daylight. This is the last economy of noble minds!

Mirabel murmured something about "Jim" having been very kind to her.

Paula relieved the situation for one moment. "I should

like Lord Douglas," she said decisively. "I don't get up early, but I think in principle that it's good—in fact, I should get up early if Mirabel did not have such late nights."

Paula, who found it very difficult to stop talking when she was talking well, and had a sympathetic audience, went on to describe the habits of a musical-comedy leading lady—when she was a good one, like Mirabel—while Mirabel racked her brains to invent meetings with Lord Douglas.

Lady Douglas was so much more interested in Mirabel than she was in her husband that she soon forgot that she had asked the question, and by this time Paula had got her second wind. She had suddenly made up her mind that the elderly person who had given Mirabel this beautiful house and all her expensive furniture, and her car, and everything else which Mirabel could not afford, was Lord Douglas. She knew from the Society papers that he was immensely rich, and if he took as much interest in musical comedy as his son did, nothing was more natural than the wish that his beautiful cousin should cut a proper dash. But, of course, it was quite another thing letting Lady Douglas know what "pals" the cousins had been. Naturally, that was why Mirabel was hesitating.

At this point Paula's jealousy was roused. She felt that she would be mortally offended if Mirabel told any of this grand secret to Lady Douglas, when she, Paula, her bosom friend, who lived in the same house with her, had not heard a word of it! She determined, with set teeth, as it were, to keep Lady Douglas off this subject until she had had time to look into it herself.

She was laying the foundations of an elaborate scheme, when Archie burst into the room. He had not waited for Jeffreys to show him up.

"Time's up, mater! Mirabel's going to take me out for a drive at three—you must get!"

Paula thought she would have fainted. She did not know how this mother and son adored each other.

Lady Douglas merely said, "You must wait two minutes, Archie, till I place all my worldly possessions at Mirabel's disposal! My dear child, consider Lanarkshire House yours! do anything you like with it; ask people to it, give parties in it, come and live there whenever you like! You ought to be living there, considering that you're the only relation

Jim has except myself and Archie." She honestly wished that she would.

The practical Paula said to herself that if they were all bitten with the same craze for showering their possessions upon Mirabel, it would have been so much better if Lady Douglas instead of Lord Douglas had established Mirabel in Bolingbroke House.

Seeing that his mother was what he called "a bit sticky," the impatient Archie put his arm through Mirabel's, and marched her out of the room and out of the house, trying in vain to wriggle free to say a proper good-bye to his mother.

"Never mind saying good-bye to me," said Lady Douglas, "that's Archie's way! Come to lunch with me to-morrow instead—you too," turning to Paula. "I know it's no good asking theatrical people to dinner. You are engaged to-morrow?—well, then, next day."

She was rather glad, in truth, that Archie had spirited Mirabel away in this abrupt fashion, for she had nothing particular to do, and Paula was just the kind of person who interested her.

"Are you busy?" she asked her. "Of course, you must be busy, writing your famous books?"

"No," said Paula, who was equally interested, as this was the first great lady she had met intimately, "I give the afternoon up to my friends."

"Bravo! Shall we stay here, or shall we take a drive in the car, or will you come home with me and have some tea?"

Paula, who was very candid, said: "I should like to have a short drive, because I can't do without an airing, and I haven't been out yet. I work all the morning. What I really should like to do is to have this drive first, and then to go home to tea with you, so as to see Lanarkshire House. I'm Scotch and to me the Douglases mean almost as much as Robert the Bruce."

"The Black Douglas was my husband's ancestor," said Lady Douglas, with a real thrill of pride at being able to say it to somebody who would understand, like the author of "The Lady of Lochleven."

All through the drive, and all the time she was at Lanarkshire House, Paula was on guard lest she should say anything to betray "the elderly person." She had not the chance. Lady Douglas did not want to talk about her

husband at all. She wanted to hear about the habits of her new literary treasure, and, not at all inquisitively, about how Mirabel got on in musical comedy, not from the point of view of success, but from the point of view of comfort and annoyance, "because, my dear Miss Maitland, there are some dreadful people connected with it! You should see some of the women that Archie, my son, has tried to make me ask to my parties to win him their favour! And they're the best of them, I suppose, or he wouldn't ask me. I can't think what the worst must be like!"

"Mirabel simply doesn't know any of them out of the theatre," said Paula. "She has a separate street-entrance to her dressing-room, and she leaves the theatre the moment she has finished her part. She doesn't know a single one of the young-men-about-town, who hang round the Green Room."

"Except Archie," said his mother. "I'm afraid that you must include him among those undesirable eligibles."

"Oh, that's different," said Paula. "He came to call on her at the house, because he learned that she was his cousin! Everything's above board there."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Lady Douglas, "because, being as beautiful as that, and leading lady at the *Babylon*, she is just the kind of thing which Archie would run after."

"Well, he didn't," said Paula, "so it's all the more credit to him!"

"Anyhow," said Lady Douglas, "it's a great relief to me to hear that she is such a lady that she has been able to keep herself clear of all that horrible business! I suppose that you, as her friend, Miss Maitland, keep a very strict watch on the men who come to the house?"

"You may be certain that I do!" said Paula. She meant to be in that very afternoon, when Mirabel and Archie returned from their drive, so she paid rather a short call at Lanarkshire House, thereby improving her position with Lady Douglas. Even Lady Douglas was afraid of people who reciprocated too much. The aristocracy like difficult people, because, in general, they live in a dread of being rushed by undesirable acquaintances, and their bringing-up makes them poor character-readers.

CHAPTER XXIV

MIRABEL'S ANXIETY ABOUT THE ELDERLY PERSON

MIRABEL was horribly frightened that Lady Douglas, and especially Paula, would find out that she did not know Lord Douglas. So on the drive with Archie she determined to draw him out on the subject of his father. She did not think he would ask awkward questions, and if he did, she meant to "shut him up," as other musical-comedy ladies would "shut him up," if he asked inconvenient questions. She did not see why she should not use her prerogative for once.

"Do you see much of your father, Archie?" she asked.

"Me see much of the governor? Not much!" he said, using the words without intending or noticing the pun. "He's given up all his sensible habits long ago!"

"What do you call sensible habits?" asked Mirabel.

"Oh, racing, seeing a bit of life at night—all kinds of sport, except very occasionally. He's eaten up with cranky wheezes, like this daylight-saving foolishness, which he's got on now, when every sensible person knows that it's not more day that you want, but more night after midnight! That's where the shoe pinches! If they had more day, they'd only give you more drill in it. Except in the Guards, they have a damned sight too much daylight-saving in the Army already—there are lots of regiments where they have parades at seven—seven a.m., Mirabel! Before I'd belong to one of them, and be quartered out of London into the bargain—oh, the whole thing's preposterous!"

"Fancy you talking about anyone being sensible, Archie, when about the only sensible thing you do is to have a cold bath every morning! and I suppose it's afternoon before you get that sometimes?"

"When I'm on leave," he said, considering the point quite gravely. "And it is a ripping feeling to know that it's the afternoon already, when you're only just having your tub! It brings everything so much nearer!"

"Archie!" she said, "I shall turn you out of the car if

you talk like that ! It makes me thoroughly ashamed of you, you miserable young decadent ! ”

“ Are you serious, Mirry ? ”

“ Quite serious ! Haven’t you ever gone in for sports ? ”

“ Yes, of course I have—I was in the Eton Eleven.”

“ Well, then, why do you talk drivel like this ?—as if life consisted of nothing but dining, with dissipations to follow ? I’ve no use for this sort of thing ! I’m an open-air girl. Now that I’ve seen so much of musical comedy . . . ”

“ How long ? ” he snapped in.

“ Getting on for two months, including the rehearsals. I wouldn’t stay in it another day, unless . . . ”

“ I know what you’re going to say,” he said, “ unless you were out for the money ! ”

“ Yes,” she said, doggedly, “ unless I was out for the money. You needn’t be frightened of my disappearing from your favourite haunts, because I’ve signed a contract for ten years.”

“ Thank God for that ! You are a holy terror, you know ! ”

“ And I hope I always shall be. You understand, Archie, don’t you, that I know you as my cousin, and not as the other thing ? ”

“ I’m not out for the other thing ! I’m out to make you my Viscountess in double-quick time ! ”

“ Well, I’m not going to be your Viscountess, in double-quick or any other time ! ”

“ I can’t help being in love with you. I plumped on you the very first time I saw you.”

“ I don’t know what that means, but I’m sure it can’t be as vulgar as it sounds.”

“ It isn’t vulgar at all, Mirry—it means . . . it means . . . it means that I planked my whole happiness in life on it.”

“ Is it so bad as that ? ” she said, trifling with her own feelings, which were just as strong as his.

“ Yes, ’pon my honour, it is ! ”

“ I don’t mind your being in love with me, Archie,” she said, “ so long as you don’t plague me with it in any way. I like you to love me ; you’re an awfully nice boy. And I feel old enough to be your aunt. You can love me as an aunt as much as you like.”

“ Aren’t you funny ! ” he said grimly.

She could not make out whether he made these puns on purpose or unconsciously, but they horrified her.

"Well, do you see much of your father?" she persisted.

She wanted to change the conversation now, as well as to get an answer.

"See much of him? When he spends his time at a wretched villa at Richmond, which he's called the Hermitage, after an old place of the Douglasses."

"What does he do there?"

"God knows, except see cranks and write to the newspapers."

"Is he a recluse?"

"How much?" said Archie.

"A man who hates his fellow-men—and, more especially, his fellow-women."

"Judging by results, I should say not. There are generally about twenty people waiting to see him, by the time he comes out from breakfast, even when he saves daylight over it."

"How do you know?—you're never up in time to see it."

"I shouldn't go there if I was—I should go to a cabby's coffee-stall, and have a cup of the strongest tea they could brew! I have it from the mater—she couldn't stand it, you know; she insisted that if he wanted to do this kind of thing, he must have a separate place to do it in."

"Perhaps he's only a recluse about women?"

"Oh, no, he isn't! He goes to all the first nights, and when I give one of my suppers, he always comes if I ask him, and he's a great 'bird,' though you wouldn't think it."

Mirabel began to feel very interested in the "elderly person." "Don't you think that perhaps he lives the life that he does because he's tired of empty parade, and wants to have the privileges of a human being?"

"The privileges of a human being?" He looked at her, to see if she was trying to be risky. After all, she was in musical comedy. But he had seen the expression which goes with that on many women's faces, when they were talking to him, and there was no trace of it on Mirabel's. She was perfectly serious. "Well," he said, "if he does, all I can say is that all those people who go to his place take a mean advantage of him, for they go on as if he was just as cranky as they are on their stunts."

Mirabel began to feel that she would be more than interested to see "the elderly person." But the question was, how was she to see him? She could not ask Archie without letting him know that she had not met his father. The difficulty of the situation was enhanced by the fact that unless she knew that Paula was going to be out, she could not ask him to her house, until he knew that *he* was "the elderly person," and what he had showered on her. She must contrive to see him somehow, and that immediately.

Archie suggested that they should run down to the Guards' Club at Maidenhead for tea. But Mirabel had the firmest objections to going to any such place with him. Besides, she meant to be back in good time, so as not to make Paula troublesome at the beginning of their friendship.

Paula, who had only been in a few minutes before they arrived, was very pleased with Mirabel's discretion, and laid herself out to entertain Archie. He was glad, because Mirabel was worried about something, and not very communicative.

Knowing that Paula was not likely to let him escape, she went to the telephone in her bedroom, and turning up the number, "Richmond 3500, Douglas, The Earl of, The Hermitage, Richmond Hill," she rang up the exchange.

"Number, please."

"Richmond 3500."

The reply came in a servant's voice :

"Is his Lordship in?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Can I speak to him?"

"His Lordship doesn't like the 'phone, ma'am, unless it's on business, but I'll give him your name, ma'am, and, might I suggest, ma'am, a message as to what you require his Lordship for?"

"It will be sufficient if you say his cousin, Miss Douglas."

"Yes, Miss—hold the line, please."

It was some time before he came to the telephone, and when he did come, he said, in a very gentle and pleasant voice : "Did you say that you were my cousin? I only have one cousin, and she is in Italy."

"She is not in Italy, she is speaking—I am Isabel, your Uncle Archibald's daughter."

"Oh, how do you do, Isabel? What can I do for you?"

"I don't think I want you to do anything for me, but I should like to see you, now that I am in England."

"Well, I should think so! Will you come to lunch to-morrow?"

Mirabel was engaged, as she had told Lady Douglas. But she was in too great a tangle to refuse, so she said: "I shall be charmed. What time, Lord Douglas?"

"Oh, at twelve. I'm making a trial of a very interesting thing, the daylight-saving idea."

"Very well, twelve o'clock. I hope we shall be alone?"

"Certainly if you wish it, but I shouldn't have asked anyone, anyhow. It would only be a dropper-in. We must have lunch in my hermitage; then I shan't be at home."

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Isabel," he said. He was charmed with her voice.

CHAPTER XXV

ENTER "THE DOUGLAS"

THE HERMITAGE occupied between two and three acres of the slope between the road and the river, half-way up Richmond Hill. The house was at the top of the slope, a discreet number of yards from the road. The name "The Hermitage" properly belonged to a stucco copy of Pius IV.'s pavilion in the gardens of the Vatican, which stood at the very bottom of the garden, on the wall over-hanging the river, and was connected with the main house by an underground passage, dignified with the name of the *crypto-porticus*, and not altogether unlike the famous passage on the Palatine in which Caligula met his end.

The garden had evidently been laid out by someone who knew his Rome well, because it had the gloomy evergreen foliage and ambitious stucco ornaments of a Roman villa, and the house itself was a copy of the small Villa Farnese which stands on the Palatine above the Forum. The original proprietor had called it Farnese (which was locally pronounced Farnees) Villa, and Lord Douglas had changed its name to the Hermitage, after the ancient stronghold of the Douglases, though he used to point to the pavilion in

the garden as the hermitage. He had no appreciation of Italian things ; he bought it merely because the pavilion in the garden, with its subterranean approach, was a great convenience to one who often liked to deny himself to his callers, if he could do so without courtesy and without absenting himself from home. He had sleeping accommodation also in his hermitage, and frequently used it.

It could be entered from the garden as well as from the *crypto-porticus*, which terminated in a door opening on to the towpath.

It being a fine day, Mirabel was conducted by the butler to the hermitage through the garden, along a broad paved path, broken by numerous flights of steps, and bordered by beds of acanthus. He opened the front door by a simple turn of the handle, and showed her into the ground-floor room on the left, in which a huge log fire was burning on a flat hearth.

She found Lord Douglas awaiting her. The Douglas was a huge man, like his ancestors in history, still very upright, though he had rather lost his slimness. He had the same clear eyes as his son, but otherwise was not very like him, for his features were slightly aquiline, and where the son's face was reckless, the father's was dignified and commanding. A human touch was given to the face by a rather audacious moustache, which modified the effect of the grave eyes. This was true to his character, for he had been a *beau sabreur*, and a great racing man in his youth, when he was Master of Douglas.* Now he was one of those useful

* Until the succession of the present Earl, the heirs of the Earls of Douglas had, like the heirs of Viscounts and Barons in the Scottish Peerage, styled themselves the "Masters of Douglas," to commemorate the fact that the 4th Earl of Douglas and 1st Duke of Touraine, under whom the family had attained its highest splendour, had, when Master of Douglas, won a great victory against the English. But on the present Earl succeeding, at the request of the College of Arms, to bring this earldom into line with other Scottish earldoms, his heir assumed his second title, "Viscount Avondale," instead of styling himself "Master of Douglas."

Undoubtedly Lord Douglas had an unique position among the public men writing to the Press, because he was willing to back his opinions with his time, his energies and his money. He subscribed liberally to every movement which he advocated ; he was willing to accompany its deputations to the Government, and to fulfil any duty from chairman to "chucker-out" at its public meetings.

He was one of those who were most insistent in favour of proclaiming

people who take an active part in all the chief movements of the day, and since he held no office, and seldom went to the House of Lords, he could give more time to them than most men of his position and influence. These were great, for he was by history the chief noble of Scotland, though his title was only an earldom, and that exceeded in antiquity by certain others. Added to this, he had great wealth, for he held large portions of the ancient estates of The Douglas all over the south-west of Scotland.

He received his cousin most cordially. "Well, Isabel," he said, "I am very glad to see you."

He shook her hand warmly, and looked as if he was about to kiss her, but drew back. If she had been an old and ugly woman, as his sole relative outside of his household, he would have felt it his duty to kiss her on such a formal

Universal Service at the beginning of the war ; of making cotton contraband ; of limiting exports to neutrals by their average consumption ; of arming all our merchant steamers and trawlers, so as to make them a menace instead of an easy prey to submarines ; of turning all public-houses in munition areas into canteens, under official control ; of prohibiting the menace caused to our supply of doctors, for the nation as well as the army, by medical students leaving their work to become combatants ; of supplying the shortage of drugs and dyes at the present moment, and re-establishing the English drug and dye industries, during and after the war, by a most rigid system of protection against German competition ; of encouraging the extension of the wheat and other food-producing industries in the United Kingdom by Government purchase-guarantees for a fixed period, so as to make England self-supporting in case her sea-supplies are cut off ; of developing our munition-making industries so as to stop the absurdity of the premier coal-and-iron country having to buy its munitions abroad, and pay fictitious prices for them ; of interning all enemy subjects and sympathizers in the United Kingdom ; of abolishing the panderings of Donington Hall and treating German prisoners in Britain exactly as British prisoners are treated in Germany ; of inaugurating a national campaign against national waste, whether of grossly overpaying the men who have not gone to fight, for fulfilling their civil duties, or of actual extravagance in stores, and undertaking unnecessary public works ; and, not long after this, he achieved his chief usefulness in providing a machinery for maintaining our crippled soldiers and sailors in comfort, and utilizing them for releasing able-bodied men to fight in their places, and as recruiting-agents in a house-to-house canvass.

Those two great movements, the C.S.A.S.A. and W.R.O., inaugurated by his influence, were to be, after the Red Cross movement, the largest, and perhaps in importance, the chief national movements of the war.

And in the midst of all this he found time to work at movements which were of general and permanent value, and not merely of war-value, such as the Daylight-Saving Bill, and the Society for the Preservation of our National Monuments.

occasion as their first meeting ; but as she was young and beautiful, instead of seeming a duty, it seemed to be presuming on their relationship.

" Aren't you going to kiss me ? " she said, interpreting his mind. " I've come to you as I should have gone to my father."

" You can use me as a father, if you like, but I'd rather you regarded me as a cousin," he said, and the kiss he gave her was cousinly.

" Well, Isabel," he continued, " though you told me over the 'phone that there was nothing I could do for you, I can see by your face that there is. I expect it will be a long job, so you had better send your car back. I shall be going into town when you return and I can give you a lift."

Mirabel did not see why it need take very long, but she supposed that Lord Douglas had some reason for the request, such as gossiping between his servants and her chauffeur ; and since, in any case, it would save Paula a taxi fare, she made no objection.

" Well, you see, Lord Douglas . . . "

" Jim, or James."

" Jim—I think James is too like a footman or a clergyman—you see, Jim, I have been leading a double life, and in double lives things are apt to get mixed."

He was genuinely sorry to hear it ; his fears were worse than the reality.

" To begin with, while I am a respectable middle-class lady out at Hammersmith, I am the leading lady of a theatre not far from Leicester Square."

" What sort of a theatre ? "

" Musical comedy."

" That accounts for it ! " he said under his breath, but she overheard him.

" Accounts for what ? " she said rather indignantly.

" For many things—for anything, in fact."

" Well, so it does," she confessed, " especially in my instance."

" Why especially in your instance ? "

" In the first place, the proprietor of my theatre wants me as his wife."

He was distinctly interested. " I am glad that you came to consult me about it, Isabel."

"I am always called by my nickname, Mirabel."

"Well, Mirabel—because, as the head of the family, I am the right person to consult. What theatre is it?"

"The *Babylon*."

"It might be worse from the worldly point of view," he said. "Young Gray is a rich man, and when you get him away from the Beauty Chorus, I believe, a very nice one. He has decent friends, too, because he was great at games when he was at Eton and Magdalen. You might do worse than young Gray. He could, of course, help you tremendously with your profession. What sort of position do you hold under him?"

"I'm his leading lady."

"Oh, then, I saw you on your first night, but I did not recognize you as the same woman without your fancy kit. I congratulate you on a really great performance. No wonder he wants to marry you! I know I should if you were my leading lady. So he wants you to be his wife, does he? Well, there's a great deal to be said for it. But, on the other hand, with your beauty and the advertisement you get as leading lady at the *Babylon*, you're sure to get the offer of a peerage."

"I've had one already from the heir of a very ancient peerage."

"You'll very likely get one from my son before you've done," he said, perfectly unconscious of the reality. "Well, if it's a rich peerage, of course, that would be a hundred times better. But it's no good doing it if there isn't sufficient money. I've seen far too much trouble arising from that source."

"I didn't come to consult you about that, Jim. I've made up my mind on that point, though I'm not going to announce it yet."

"Well, how can I be of use?"

"In the first place, I told Lady Douglas a lie—at least, I let her believe one."

"When was that?"

"When she came to see me yesterday."

"And what was the lie?"

"I let her believe that I knew you."

"How did you do that?"

"Like this: She said, 'I suppose you've met Jim lots of

times already—he never tells me anything,’ and as it was essential that Paula Maitland, who lives with me, should go on thinking that I knew you, I said, ‘ Jim has been very kind to me.’ That was for Paula’s consumption.”

“ And what did Janet say ? ”

“ She did not say anything, because Paula told her something which diverted her attention.”

“ So you told ‘ Paula ’ that you knew me ? ”

“ Not exactly—I let her believe it.”

“ You seem specially good at letting people believe things ! ”

“ Is it not my profession ? ”

“ Oh, I forgot your profession ! But there’s nothing very heinous about that sin.”

“ Not if you bear me out, to Janet and Paula, that I did meet you before I went to live in my house.”

“ What has that to do with it ? ”

“ Everything hangs upon this circumstance.”

“ I take your word for it. I’m game to tell such a very little white lie as that I met my own cousin more than two months ago. Is that all ? ”

“ As regards Janet, yes ; as regards Paula, she’s got to swallow a much bigger one. She’s got to believe that you gave me my house, and all its lovely furniture, and my car, and a few things of that kind.”

A churchy person would probably have insisted upon knowing who gave Mirabel these costly presents, and what she gave him in return. The Douglas, who had gone through the same dissipations and escapades as other men of title and great wealth in the army, though he knew what such presents were likely to signify, forebore to humiliate a woman by any such inquisition.

“ I see,” he said. “ You have done this, which was very foolish, if the facts are not what it would imply, and you want me to come forward as the donor of them, if you have to say how you came by them, because I, as the head of your family, might be supposed to have made some provision for you on your coming to London. Why didn’t you come to me ? I would have bought them for you gladly.”

“ But you must let it be understood that you did, if I have to refer people to you, in order—I will be frank—to save my good name.”

"Of course I'll do it," he said.

"If you insist upon knowing my story, I'll tell it to you in confidence, but I'd much rather not."

"I'd much rather not hear it. If there was anything to cover up for the sake of our family, I'd rather pay for the covering than have to hear what it was, where a woman was concerned, but I gather that we are up against a very novel proposition. I am not to pay anything, but merely to admit the soft impeachment that I have paid it—to show a receipt without a cheque having passed? I will do it for you, my cousin. I'm glad that you came to me when you found yourself in a scrape."

"Oh, Jim, you're an angel!" cried Mirabel enthusiastically. "There's one thing I can tell you—it sounds worse than it really is. I haven't done anything dreadful, I assure you, beyond staying with the donor for a month."

He looked very grave at this, but he said: "Whatever you have done, it would be my duty to help you to get out of it without spoiling your young life." As he said these words, his soldierly, masterful face was transfigured with compassion.

"What a good Christian you are, Jim!" she said, from her heart, but instantly changed to a lighter vein with the remark: "But you must be prepared for a blow to your feelings."

"What is that?"

"You are an 'elderly person.'"

"I don't follow," he said, with puzzled but amused eyes, searching for the joke. That there should be a joke at all reassured him a little, for though he, like his son, had been a favourite of the Green Room when he was a young officer in the Scots Greys, he thought it a terrible thing that a beautiful and well-born girl, only just in the twenties, should be in the tentacles of the octopus. "Why am I an 'elderly person'?"

"Because Paula—Paula Maitland, who lives with me—knows that an 'elderly person' gave me all the luxuries I possess, except my income, from Bolingbroke House to my Rolls-Royce."

"Well, I hope the 'elderly person' has not been a villain."

"Not to me—he's been a model. Frankly, he's an admirer, who gets no change out of me at all, but he goes on admiring, and would like to go on giving."

"How did you come to let him give you all these things, little cousin? You must have known that it would put you in a false position."

"He got me in a cleft stick, and forced me to accept them. I expected awful things, but they never happened. He really was a man of his word. He's a harmless admirer."

"Then why can't you tell Miss Maitland who he is? The rest of the world, I gather, does not know that you have come by your possessions in any unordinary way?"

"You don't know Paula. She would not believe me or spare me."

"But she's under such an obligation to you, if she lives with you—probably in considerable luxury—and does nothing and pays nothing in return."

"That would not weigh with Paula. She would leave the house, and could not help embellishing the story of her martyrdom."

"She must be a very dangerous woman. If I were you, I should get rid of her as soon as possible, and have nothing more to do with her."

"But I love her dearly, and she loves me: we have the most ideal friendship that two women ever had. It's the next best thing to a perfect marriage."

"Preserve me from women! The older I get, the less I want to see of them. That is the chief reason why I live in this hermitage. I could not stand all the falseness which surrounds Janet at our house in Kensington. The women in what she calls her *salon* exploit her the whole time. I never was in such a hotbed of hypocrisy. The Chorus is downright, if it is greedy—that place is a regular incubator."

"I haven't been in the house yet, Jim, though Janet came to see me yesterday, and created me a sort of daughter of the house. But I am sure, from my knowledge of these 'salons,' as you call them, that you are quite wrong about the people who go to them. There is an 'incubator' atmosphere of flattery for the powerful person who is lavish in her hospitality, to those from whom she expects nothing but the distinction and amusement which they give to her parties, but it springs from gratitude and not from intrigue. Believe me, there is nothing farther from these people's minds than intrigue! They go there to enjoy the lovely

surroundings and the luxury, and to meet the Society people who have brains enough to appreciate them."

"Well, that puts things in a new light. I'll study the position from that point, and see if I can agree with you. But in the interval, can't you throw a little more light on the 'elderly person'?"

"Well, he gave me my house—the freehold of it; he gave me *carte blanche* for its decoration, and paid the bills; the furniture ditto; and he gave me the car. He would like to have thrown in a country cottage, but I was able to resist that by pointing out that I should never use it."

"And I am supposed to be the 'elderly person' who has done all this."

"Yes."

"Did he help you choose and decorate things?"

"No, except that when I had chosen a house, he came to inspect it with his lawyers before he made the purchase—chiefly, I think, to see that I was not being taken in. He never saw anything until I was occupying the house, and he came to call."

"In strict confidence, does Miss . . . Miss Paula know him?"

"Yes, and mistrusts him very much. She regards him as a regular wolf in sheep's clothing."

"Well, I hope she's wrong."

"She is wrong. I trust him as I trust you."

"My dear Isabel, don't you know how dangerous it is for a man of fifty-five to have a beautiful young woman of—how old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

"A beautiful young woman of twenty-two saying these things to him?"

"I always say what I mean," said Mirabel.

"A very dangerous habit; you will find people taking advantage of it."

"They'll find me once bitten, twice shy, if they do."

"It may be all right if you're sufficiently ruthless, but you don't look very ruthless, little cousin."

"I hope you'll never try."

"No, by God, I won't. Until my son has children, you come next to him as my successor, just as much as if you were my daughter, instead of my cousin. And I shall look

upon you as if you were my daughter ; that's the soundest position."

" Then it is quite certain that I mustn't call you Jim."

" Do," he said, " it's music to me."

" I wasn't serious, Jim dear."

She saw that her cousin was going to be the sheet-anchor of her life. She had never felt so attracted to any man—not, of course, in the way in which she felt attracted to Archie, and tried to feel attracted to Gray, but for sheer absolute liking and feeling of trust. She knew now that it was the strain of him in Archie which made Archie so irresistible to her.

" When are you going to show me all the things which I—which that 'elderly person' gave you ?" he asked, while they were lunching in that strange, almost unfurnished, make-believe piece of Italy, which was like home to her.

She thought for a minute, and then she said, " This afternoon. Paula will be out to lunch with Mrs. Peroxide, who is a great deal too grand to lunch before two—the place where I ought to be if I had not come down to see you on business."

" Does Miss Paula—I wish I could remember her proper name—know where you are ?"

" Of course she does. It suited the elaborate fiction which she is creating in her mind about my affairs, to believe that you do all my business for me."

" What is this fiction, Mirabel ? "

" Wait and see. It includes, among other things, that you were the 'elderly person' with whom I spent that month."

" Well, that very easily might have happened if you were anxious to visit Scots Castle. I should not think it necessary to put you off if Janet couldn't leave London when you had your holiday. If a man of my age can't invite his own cousin to stay with him, the world is too rotten to matter. Besides, a lie isn't a lie if it is to save a woman's good name, without injuring another woman to do it."

He gave her a lunch worthy of the *Ritz*, with a steaming dish of Irish stew set in front of himself, the only dish of which he partook, except cheese, which he ate with oatcake and salt butter.

When the butler—there was no other servant in the room

—began to fill her glass with champagne, she put up her hand. "May I drink water, after I've drunk your health in this drop? I do take a glass of champagne sometimes, but only when I need a tonic, or don't wish to look peculiar. The night we had the *Babylon* dinner, for instance, I took a glass. But I like water, or very weak red wine and water, the drinks I've been accustomed to in Italy, very much better."

"Have some red wine and water now? I've got some very light claret."

"Many thanks—I prefer water alone. I am sorry that you had the champagne opened for me."

"Don't apologize," he said, "champagne in moderation is one of my weaknesses; one of the few privileges in being wealthy which I value is being able to drink champagne like beer. Fancy food is thrown away on me—I like beefsteak pudding and Irish stew, and any amount of potatoes."

His simplicity captivated her, especially when she discovered that he had sent her car home because he intended to leave the house by the towpath entrance and meet his car in the Petersham Road, his hall being full of organizers, flavoured with journalists, who persisted in waiting to waylay him there, though they had been told that he was out.

"Are those the Daylight-Saving people?" she asked.

"At least one of them. I'm very closely in touch with that movement. I think it one of the best things we've had for a long time."

"Do you practise all its precepts yourself?"

"I do my best. I get up early enough to have my breakfast at sunrise."

"What a pity you don't live in town," she thought. "Archie could have his early morning tea with you, instead of at the cabmen's shelter." She said, "I admire a man who practises what he preaches in the small hours of the morning."

"I can assure you that I enjoy getting up at five much more than sitting up till five, as I used to in my salad days. I should advise you to go steadily on the salad days, Mirabel, they're so indigestible."

"They present no attraction to me," she said. "My dream is to be happily married."

"Well, I shouldn't think there was much difficulty about that, with all your advantages."

"It may seem perfectly simple, but I find it the most difficult thing in the world."

Mirabel had given the chauffeur directions how to find her house. It was an easy matter from Richmond, since he had only to take the Chiswick Road into town, and turn down when he came to Weltje Road.

When they got there, and Jeffreys opened the door to them, she said, "Give Lord Douglas's chauffeur a cup of tea, or anything else he prefers, please, Jeffreys."

She did not wish there to be any unnecessary mystery about the 'elderly person.' The chauffeur was a discreet man, as chauffeurs go, but he could not resist asking Jeffreys, as he settled into a comfortable seat by the pantry-fire, "Do you think she's really his Lordship's cousin?"

Jeffreys, who was desperately in love with his beautiful mistress, said, "Of course she is! Her Ladyship was here yesterday!"

"Oh, that settles it," said the chauffeur, "settles it for her, and settles it for us! We shan't be here much with her Ladyship knocking round: he can't stand all the fuss she makes!"

"Don't they hit it?" asked Jeffreys, who had no aversion to gossip, where his mistress was not concerned.

"It's as I said," replied the chauffeur, "they hit it all right, but when her Ladyship is to the fore, his Lordship takes a back seat: what he just hates is palaver!"

"He seems a nice gentleman, too," said Jeffreys.

"Nice isn't the word for it—he's one of the best! But he's had so much of everything, that he's getting tired; he's gone stale on Society, and is taking up cranks—that's the Aristocracy's form of turning religious before they die."

"Then my young missus 'll be the best thing for him!" said Jeffreys, with proud confidence.

"That's so," said the chauffeur, "if her Ladyship lets the old man have a look in."

"I shall have to see to that," said Jeffreys, with calm superiority, quite unmoved by the fact that he was dealing with the most illustriously born un-royal person in Europe.

"I think we'd better see the garden first, Jim," said Mirabel.

"Yes—daylight doesn't last for ever."

When she had taken him round, he said :

"By Jove! this is a ripping place! Have I done all this?"

"You've paid for it, but have not seen it before. But nothing here gives me so much pleasure as the Italian ornaments in your garden."

"You're welcome to the lot. I don't care about them, except the *crypto-porticus* and the pavilion, and they'd be rather difficult to move."

"Perhaps I'll let you give me some of them at some future time, but it would break Paula's heart if I touched the garden now."

"Don't do that," he said, as if she meant to throw it on the ground there and then, like an empty bottle at a picnic.

She smiled indulgently, and said, "You put in most of the flowers in the same way, and that row of oleanders in tubs which is just going to be taken from the terrace to the studio for the winter."

"I had no idea that I was such a good gardener," he said, "but I'm Scotch, so I suppose that it was born in me."

"Now, quick, into the house, Jim, so that we can see everything before Paula comes back."

"This modern idea of having all the walls painted white does brighten things up!" he said. "I shall work it in at the Hermitage."

"It isn't white, and it isn't paint—Paula says that it's ivory *aqua tinta*."

"I'm afraid I don't see the difference, but in any case I like it."

She drew his attention to Paula's ideas and devices all over the house.

"Everything is Paula in this house," she said, "except my bedroom, which I'm going to show you now. I would not have my walls white; I insisted on having an Italian artist in to do a fresco of Lake Como all round the walls. We are fond of using the scene-painter in our houses in Lombardy. That's my villa which you see in front of you."

The artist had executed his task successfully. The side facing the bed he had given up to the promontory with the

Villa Visconti crowning its summit, and with the quaint old harbour, guarded by the stone saint, at its foot. The room contained absolutely nothing, except a green carpet, which looked quite like grass, with its long woollen blades, in the half-light, and a low bedstead of heavy walnut, enamelled white, with a bookcase and teacup-shelf coming out like an ear on each side of its head, and its foot decorated with the famous Douglas motto, *Jamais arrière*, in gilt, surrounded by a gilt scroll.

"I see you've got our old *Forward* motto in its French dress," he said, "but why don't you have the other as well? I like it even better."

"I don't know about it—what motto is it?"

"*Pro patria.*"

"I'll have it put underneath the other."

"No, over it. We always use this at the top and the other at the bottom. You know what it means, don't you?"

"I can guess. It shall go at the top."

When they had finished with the motto, she said, "Isn't this a modern bedroom? With absolutely nothing in it but the bed. Everything else is in the dressing-room."

"Where is the dressing-room?" he asked.

"Through that door."

"Where is the door?"

Even when she pointed to it, he could hardly distinguish it, so skilfully had the two doors been made to resemble the walls, in order that they might come into the frescoes without disturbing the effect.

"I shall have a Scottish moor bedroom at the Hermitage on the same plan," he said. "I often long for my moors, and I hardly ever pay them a visit."

Candidly, Mirabel thought that purple moors stretching up the walls would be rather oppressive, but she did not air her opinion.

"You have bought some very good pieces," he said, when they had finished their tour of inspection, and returned to the drawing-room for tea.

"It was not I, but Paula."

"Your Miss Maitland must have good judgment."

"That must be her," said Mirabel, catching the rustle of a skirt outside the door. "Paula!" she called out.

"Yes, dear?"

"Come in here!"

As she came in, a big man of great nobility of face and bearing, but with a charming affability, rose with noticeable promptness from his seat.

"Jim," said Mirabel, "this is Miss Maitland. Paula, let me introduce Lord Douglas."

"I have just been admiring your taste in decorating and furnishing," he began, when he caught a warning glance from Mirabel, and he hastily continued, "I'd no idea that you could do so much with such a ramshackle old shop!"

"I have improved it, haven't I?" said Paula triumphantly.

"Wonderful! I couldn't have believed it."

"Given the money, of course," said Paula, with a knowing glance at Lord Douglas, which made him blush like Mirabel—it was a family failing—"it was perfectly easy, and I had *carte blanche*." The words she used were "I had," but the tones said even more plainly "you gave me" *carte blanche*.

"The money was very well spent," he said. She seemed to expect him to say something.

"I am glad that you approve of what I have done."

"Of course I do!"

Paula felt quite certain that she was right about him. He was "the elderly person"—and what a delightful person he was to have worked for!

"Did you go into the garden?" she asked.

"Yes, we went round it directly we got here."

"Did you think it much altered?"

"Well, you see, I never saw it before."

Mirabel deliberately let a cup and saucer—and they belonged to her best tea-set—fall and break.

"You see, I never went out in the garden—I took that for granted."

"But I suppose Mirabel looked at the garden before she took the house?"

"Of course I did!" said Mirabel in haste, to prevent him replying. "I cared more for the garden and the river than the house itself."

"The house is a gem," said Paula—"Georgian of the best period—don't you think so, Lord Douglas?"

"Oh yes," he answered briskly, "I knew it was a good house the moment I saw it."

"It was lucky that Mirabel had you with her when she looked over it."

Lord Douglas was growing desperate. He felt that he must make some protest in the interests of truth.

"No, she took it on her own," he said. "I didn't see it till some time afterwards." Then, growing afraid that he had betrayed Mirabel, he added, "Till she had settled everything in her own mind."

"I'm sure that's just modesty on your part," said Paula, and as he blushed again, she was confirmed in her opinion. "I hope you didn't think the decorations I ordered too expensive?"

"You can't have good work without paying for it," he said sententiously.

"And the furniture?—it ran into four figures!"

"I was saying to Isabel—Mirabel, you call her, but she is Isabel to me, as that is the name by which we have always been accustomed to speak of her. . . ."

"Well, I wish you would call me Mirry," said Mirabel, to make a diversion.

"I was saying to *Mirry* just as you came in what very good pieces there were among the furniture, and, of course, you always have to pay for good pieces."

"I paid very little for them, in proportion to their value," said Paula.

"I never knew anybody so clever about these things as you are," said The Douglas, and Paula, whose mind was running that way, thought he was praising the bargaining which she had done while she was furnishing the house—though he was talking in the air helplessly, vaguely hoping that he was not betraying Mirabel's secret.

"Well, you didn't mind the total cost?" she at length said, right out.

"Not in the least!"—and feeling that he ought to say something more gracious to her, after all her trouble, he said, "I should not have liked to interfere, anyway."

"What a dear man!" she said to herself. "How pleasant it would be if everyone was like that to work for!"

But she had not finished with him yet. There was that month which Mirabel had spent with the elderly relative.

"I suppose that you have some very lovely things at the place where Mirabel visited you, haven't you?" She said

this, not to cross-examine him, or catch him tripping, but just as something polite and cordial to say. She felt very cordial to him indeed, for nobody could suspect such a man—the man he was now, whatever he might have been in his Scots Greys days—of evil designs on Mirabel, and he spoke of her as if she was so very much one of the family—just as if she had been a sister, or even a daughter.

In blank desperation he said, "Well, she seemed to think so, but I don't. I couldn't see anything in the things which she admired, myself."

"I suppose the fact is that you have such heaps of possessions, and some of them so wonderful, that you don't give a thought to the things at the place where she visited you?"

"No, frankly, I don't. It's such a small place, and there's nothing in it which is worth looking at, let alone valuable."

"I'm afraid that you are dreadfully spoilt," said Paula. "You judge everything by the standard of Lanarkshire House."

"Indeed I don't! I'm always thankful to be out of it."

"Well, however small it was, Mirabel enjoyed herself very much when she was with you, didn't you, Mirabel?"

"I enjoyed myself awfully!" said Mirabel—referring to her lunch at the Hermitage.

"I have found you out at last!" said Paula, with a peculiar smile, when Lord Douglas had gone.

Mirabel was in rather a quandary. If she let Paula enjoy her victory unopposed, the enjoyment would be spoilt; Paula might even become suspicious; but she was terrified lest by saying the wrong thing, she should break down the useful working fiction which Paula had built up.

It seemed a good idea to protest with warmth that she never had attempted to make any secret of her friendship with Lord Douglas. This had the advantage of being true, because the friendship was non-existent till a few hours before.

"You did make a mystery of it, Mirabel: you know you did! Why on earth didn't you confess before that he was the 'elderly person'?"

"Because," she said in desperation, "I did not see how he could help being annoyed, if I dragged his name into the matter."

"Well, you see, he wasn't annoyed at all when I let him see that I knew!"

"Men hate being talked about," said Mirabel, "though they don't mind talking about themselves."

"And women make secrets out of nothing. It would have been years before you told me this, and I got it all out of him in a few minutes."

"You are very clever, Paula," said Mirabel, with a laugh up her sleeve. "But, for goodness' sake don't breathe a word of this to Lady Douglas, or you will never enter Lanarkshire House again! We shall be put down for a pair of adventur-
esses."

"I will be careful, I promise you," said Paula, who had no wish to close the golden vistas which had begun to open in that direction.

"Wasn't it screamingly funny, Jim, the way in which she relieved us from the trouble of inventing?" said Mirabel, the next time she met her cousin.

"I wish there was nothing to invent," he said gravely, adding immediately, to her relief, "but I'm not regretting that I stood by you, Mirry."

"Some day you'll know that it is nothing beyond the pale which you are shielding, but I cannot speak out now, without precipitating the very catastrophe which I wish to avoid."

"At any rate, I'm not the person to hold up my hands in righteous horror! If I'd been the man, and someone else had been the woman, I suppose I might have looked at the mystery—whatever it is—quite differently."

"You forget, Jim, that you *are* the man—Paula has settled that quite definitely. You've got to convince Paula, and me too, Jim," she said, looking him straight in the eyes, "that you are to be trusted with me."

"I give you the honour of The Douglas," he said. "Do you know the old Scots proverb about us?"

She raised herself on tip-toe to kiss him with delicious frankness, as she answered him. "'As loyal as a Douglas.'"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE RIVALS MEET

WHILE Mirabel and Paula were with Lady Douglas in the morning-room at Lanarkshire House, waiting for lunch to be announced, Paula, who was always apt to do the talking, said, "I'm so sorry that we could not come yesterday, Lady Douglas, but we were engaged to Mrs. Peroxide, and even then Mirabel had to disappoint her, because Lord Douglas sent for her about some business of hers."

This was a deduction of Paula's own. Mirabel had only told her that she could not go to Mrs. Peroxide, because she had to see Lord Douglas. Nor had she ever given Paula the slightest ground for her next statement.

"Lord Douglas helps her in all her business."

"I remember her saying that Lord Douglas was very kind to her," said Lady Douglas, "and it's only right, considering that he is the head of the family."

"I hope Jim did all you wanted him to do, yesterday," she said, turning to Mirabel, in blissful ignorance of what a very pointed remark she was making.

"He was an angel! He did more than I had any right to expect."

"Jim would," said the wife who saw so little of him, "he's the most unselfish man I ever knew, except about meeting people. He hates meeting people. When he does come to one of my parties, he just talks to one or two people he likes outside the room where the singing is going on."

"Poor Jim!" said Mirabel. "I can picture how miserable he would be!"

This was acting, but not what is called "swank." Since Lady Douglas imagined that Mirabel had known Lord Douglas ever since she came to London, it was necessary to drop a hint of intimacy, now that she really had met him, and knew what she could say with safety; and though she and Lord Douglas had only met once before Lady Douglas asked the

question, the bond of sympathy between them was so complete that they were like sister and brother.

The hands of the clock were getting nearer two than one-thirty.

"Archie's coming to lunch," said his mother, "and he's always late. He's so busy."

It was hard for Mirabel to resist a smile. Lady Douglas was very indulgent to Archie. She had expected that he would be late. She had asked him because she liked giving him a pleasure, and liked having him about. Though he came so seldom he was the light of the house.

When he did come, his face wore its most charming expression ; he was so in love with Mirabel. He pointed out to her the red-haired portrait of Mary, Queen of Scots, with which he had compared her when he was in her dressing-room ; it was by François Clouet. Lady Douglas had brought it up from the gallery at Scots Castle, where it had hung since the Queen gave it to the boy Douglas of that day, who was her page.

" You see I was right about the hair," he said.

" You were. I think I ought to wear a red wig—when I come here."

Nothing interesting happened then, or on the Friday and Saturday, though they met Archie on both days.

Paula had told Archie that they were always in on Sunday afternoon. She had no doubt that he would come—if he got the invitation, and she thought that he would be such a pleasant surprise for her friends.

Archie promised to come. Paula, though she knew that Archie was one of the "bhoys" at the *Babylon*, never gave a thought to the fact that this was Gray's day for visiting them.

Archie came early, and was very much in possession when Gray arrived, but Mirabel got up and devoted herself to Gray, who seemed put out.

" How did young Avondale squeeze himself in here ? " he asked, having the incidents of the *Babylon* dinner, and Archie's attempt to force himself into her dressing-room, which had reached his ears, fresh in his mind.

There was an angry retort on Mirabel's lips, but she managed to hold it back, because she knew what Archie's character was at the theatre, and she knew that Gray, who, as proprietor of the *Babylon*, had kept his promise of shielding her

from annoyance by the Johnnies who haunted the Green Room, so loyally, had a right to feel anxious at seeing one of the most dangerous of the golden youth installed at Boling-broke House. She explained quite pleasantly that there was no squeezing himself in about it, because he was her cousin.

"A pukker cousin, Mirabel?—first or second? Are you really one of his Douglasses?"

"Truthfully, yes. His mother came to call last Tuesday, and I lunched with her on Thursday, and Lord Douglas on Wednesday."

"Oh, that's all right, then—up to a certain point. But I rather wish he wasn't your cousin; there's nothing which that imp isn't up to! At any rate, I hope he'll have the good grace to stop his larking, where his cousin is concerned!"

"I'm sure he will," she said. "He's been here several times, and, don't be annoyed!—he really is as careful not to distress me as you are."

Gray was far from happy in his mind. He was afraid that if Lord Avondale was behaving himself so well, he must be in love with Mirabel, which would be the most disastrous thing of all. The only lamp in the darkness was his discovery that his wife was so well-born, a fact to which she had never made any allusion.

He hoped that Lord Avondale's attempts to force himself upon her at the *Babylon* dinner and in her dressing-room were only his way of trying to introduce himself to his cousin. They were strictly in accordance with Archie's precedents, if they were. But they were none the less reprehensible. The one thing that could be said in his favour was that Mirabel's address was not yet in either of the Court directories or the telephone book, and that the strictest precautions to prevent its being known were taken at the theatre, so that he supposed that he must have got it from family sources.

At that moment their eyes met. Archie nodded to him, and called out, "How do you do, Gray?" rather off-handedly. He was just as much annoyed at finding the proprietor of the *Babylon* at his cousin's house, as Gray was at finding him there. He did not think it the least necessary for them to carry their acquaintance beyond business hours. Because she was his leading lady was no reason for her making a friend of him. And lastly, Archie had an even lower opinion of Oliver Gray's morals than Gray had of his.

"How do you do, Avondale?" replied Gray, even more off-handed in his manner.

"You two," said Mirabel, half laughing, half angry, and arrogating to herself the musical-comedy liberty of speech, "just remember where you are, and the fact that one of you is my best friend, and the other my cousin! Otherwise, you, Archie—I can order you about as a member of the family, though I can't well order Mr. Gray, because he is my 'boss'—will have to say good-bye. Shake hands, if you want to please me."

Archie instantly got up, and went over to Gray, holding out his hand, with laughter in his eyes as well as on that lovely, boyish mouth. Gray took his hand warmly. The way in which Archie could "cry peccavi" was quite irresistible.

"Now both of you come and talk to me," said Mirabel, putting out all the magnetic power of charm which she usually reserved for acknowledging encores, since, far from having any desire to encourage the advances of either Gray or Archie, she dreaded them. "What shall we talk about?" said Mirabel. "I know! You two experienced people shall tell me how to behave—I don't mean here, in my own house; I have my ideas about that—but in the theatre, or the streets, when people try to speak to me without an introduction."

"I suppose you heard how she squashed me, Gray?" asked Archie, with a grimace.

"Yes, I heard, and I'm going to believe that you were only trying to get to speak to her because you were her cousin."

"Well, that's rather a fancy view of it, but we'll leave it at that. Do you really want us to coach you, Mirry?"

"Of course! I want you to teach me what to do so that the man may be shamed into behaving like a gentleman, as Archie did just now," she said, smiling a reward to him.

They gave her the most elaborate directions, capping each other with instances of the wiles of man, which sounded screamingly funny as they told them, and they carried the good humour which arose out of it through dinner, to which both were invited to stay.

The victory remained with Gray, whom Mirabel asked to stay behind for a few minutes to settle a question of business. And he would have known that the victory was greater than he supposed, if he had overheard the conversation which

took place when he waited, sick at heart, while she went down to see Archie off.

"Archie," she had said, "don't come on Sundays. Sunday is Mr. Gray's day. You must know how much I owe to him, and I should feel a beast and a cad if I gave him nothing in return. He never sees me except on Sunday, and never sees me alone then, so it isn't much for me to devote myself to him on that one afternoon."

"Poor chap! he must want to marry you, and I know what that is, so I'll do what you tell me. Only you must be very nice to me on the other six days."

"It isn't going to be six days, Archie," she said, wishing in her heart that it could be seven. "Three at the outside!"

When she got back to her husband, he did not upbraid her. He made not a single complaint about Archie. His compact with her was that he should not mention their marriage, or make advances to her, anywhere or in any way. He could be her friend, an intimate friend, if he was content to be nothing more, and he had accepted the terms. In particular, he was not to attempt to impose any restraint upon her liberty of action.

His face wore a look of grave friendliness, which relaxed into welcome as she reappeared. Paula had not spoken to him. She was engrossed with the literary critic of the *Lancashire Guardian* at the other end of their big drawing-room.

He was paying his call in the evening, because he had been golfing in the afternoon. He was so fascinated with her wit, that when one of her novels was sent him for review he used to review the kind of book he expected her to write, instead of the book which she had written.

Paula used to accuse him of it herself. "There's no such thing as free criticism," she said. "If the critic is not under the influence of the author, he's under the influence of the editor. The only just critics are publishers' readers. If a book-review advised the Public as honestly as 'readers' advise publishers, there'd be something in it, and the Public has a right to expect good advice as to how it shall spend its six shillings."

"Thank you, Oliver," said Mirabel simply, when she came in, but the "thank-you" was very significant, and he felt rewarded. And she added, as he made a motion to rise:

"Don't leave me with those two. He may not go for a long while, and Paula'll want to talk shop to him as long as he stays."

The sidelong glances of the critic revealed that he would have liked a few words with Mirabel, but she was determined to give herself up to Gray, to compensate him for the interruption.

"You must not mind Archie," she said. "He's only twenty, and I treat him as a child. I told him not to come on Sundays any more. I don't want ragging conversations when you're here, we have such a lot to talk about."

CHAPTER XXVII

AT LADY DOUGLAS'S SALON

AS the year flew on to the glorious early summer of 1914, Mirabel grew troubled about Archie. He was so openly and devotedly in love with her, and she with him, though not a kiss had passed between them.

Moreover, though she could not make up her mind to live with Gray, she was his wife, and was loyal to him. Her difficulty lay in the getting over her aversion to him as a husband. The monopoly of winning her affections, if he could do it without any overt advances, was his.

Her outward relations with Archie had not changed. She allowed him no liberties, though she placed practically no restrictions on his seeing her, so long as he did not come to her at the theatre, and did not come to her house on Sunday, or on more than two afternoons a week. This was not a hardship, when they had Lanarkshire House, where they were far freer from interruptions, at their disposal.

At the same time, she trusted herself more with Gray, now that she found how completely she could trust him.

He, too, was often at Lanarkshire House. Mirabel, seeing other theatrical managers habitués at those receptions, felt that it would be unworthy of her if she did not introduce him to them, and, as a step towards it, asked Lady Douglas if she might bring him to dinner one Sunday night, because he always dined with her on Sundays, and she wished to be

present at one of the gay dinners which preceded Lady Douglas's receptions.

Lady Douglas thought it would be most interesting to meet the presiding genius of Archie's favourite *Babylon*, and sent a cordial note in reply. She was perfectly charmed with Gray when he arrived. He was so distinguished, so entertaining, so extremely good-looking.

"What a charming man to work for!" she said to Mirabel.

"He is, I assure you—a perfect angel!"

Mirabel stayed by him a good deal that evening. It was his day, and he was her guest, as it were, and she thought that it was due to him to show the public the ideal relations which existed between them. From the first, Lady Douglas had given her the status of a daughter of the house, though there was something incongruous about a daughter calling her adopting parents Janet and Jim. Lord Avondale, who was always dancing attendance on her, had been frankly told that he must make way for Gray on this occasion.

Being accustomed to musical-comedy manners, he was not hurt, but he was none the less forlorn at being deprived of her society. There was no one else at his mother's house whom he wanted to meet, but merely to be seeing her was something, so he went and watched.

She was making herself charming to Gray. She not only hardly left him, but she seemed bent on showing how much she thought of him.

This lent her new graces, double graces, in Archie's eyes, for it showed her *simpatica*—this was not the name which Archie attached to it—without the mist of reserve in which she commonly enveloped it, and it gave him a gnawing feeling of jealousy, for it recalled the evening and the conversations of that banquet at the *Babylon Restaurant*, at which he had first seen her. On that night it had been common parlance that the reason why Gray had introduced no one to her but his own special guests like Captain O'Neill, was that he was "desperately gone on her" himself.

It was true that beyond having her seated next to him, and refusing to let the golden youth be introduced to her, he had shown no signs of paying any attention to her during the dinner, and he was distinctly reserved in his attitude to her to-night—not at all the old Oliver Gray whom Archie remembered talking to the Beauties of the Stage, though he

was always chivalrous to a woman. This disconcerted Archie—he took it as evidence of a serious design on Mirabel's hand—and made the pangs of jealousy keener. He was too nice a man for jealousy to manifest itself outwardly in his actions ; it was a pain with him, not a passion.

But seeing Mirabel allowing herself to be attractive to Gray, and allowing him to monopolize her, added fuel to Archie's love for her, and he stood a few paces back from the edge of the crowd which filled his mother's winter-garden, with the fox of the Spartan boy eating his heart, as he watched Mirabel.

Presently he heard a familiar voice say : " Hullo, Archie ! What's given you the hump ? "

It was Lord Douglas. The outside edge was his usual position at his wife's parties, though he generally had some attractive woman—of his or her seeking—to keep him company. On this occasion he was alone ; like his son, he had come to see Mirabel, and was not taking the slightest notice of the brilliant gathering of celebrities whom Mollie Menteth, graceful and smiling, was so busily introducing to each other.

" I'm odd man out," said Archie. " The other blighter's won the toss ! " His eyes indicated Gray.

" Are you very gone in that direction, Archie ? Is she going to be Viscountess Avondale, and, in due time, when I am gathered to my fathers in the vaults of St. Bride's, Countess of Douglas ? "

" I am afraid not, sir."

" Why not, Archie ? If you marry Mirry, I will withdraw all I have ever said against your marrying a girl from the *Babylon*, or the *Gaiety*, or the Halls. I did not think a Douglas, coming of a family which had married a Queen of Scotland, and bred the ancestor of the Kings of England, in its junior line, ought to take his wife from the stage, and you said you would never marry anyone else because she would be so dull. By your own standards, you couldn't call it dull marrying the leading lady of the *Babylon*, and she's a Douglas of the senior line."

" But, my dear father, I did put the question before I had known her twenty-four hours ; there never was such a little bit of love at first sight, and she turned it down without moving an eyelash. She simply wasn't taking any ! "

"Would it be any good my putting in a word, do you think?"

"Where I hadn't a look in? Oh, father!"

Lord Douglas was too modest to suggest that the bearer of the most historical name in Scotland might have had some weight. He only thought of it as a thing of which Archie did not approve. It was Archie's marriage of which they were talking, and Archie had been allowed to decide for himself ever since he was eighteen.

"Why won't she have you, Archie?" he asked. "Because she doesn't think you'd make a good husband? You haven't the antecedents of one!"

Lord Douglas was not a Puritan, though he was not "unfaithful" to Lady Douglas. She had been, as the wife of his youth, a great beauty, and was still a lovely woman; and, even before he lived so much apart from her, he was too much taken up with the serious side of life to devote much time to women, though he liked meeting the pretty women of two worlds—these at his wife's, those at his son's parties.

But when he was Master of Douglas, and a Cavalry subaltern, he had taken all the gods gave him, like Archie, and considered it only natural for a wealthy young nobleman with great good looks and excellent health—just as natural, in fact, as it had been for him to own racehorses and win the classic events, and play polo. So popular was he that to the day on which he retired to soberer pursuits he was always spoken of as "Jim Douglas," instead of receiving his title. Therefore, he had never "been the heavy father" to Archie.

Provided that Archie showed himself a good sportsman and what is called the soul of honour, he could sow his wild oats as he pleased. Lord Douglas kept the eye of an elder brother on him, that was all; and even an elder brother might have asked Archie not to make a Chorus-girl an ancestress of future Douglases.

"Why won't she have me?" said Archie. "Because she is booked, I believe. I fancy that she is engaged in some sort of a way to Oliver Gray, of the *Babylon*, though she has never told anybody so. There's a sort of understanding between them which makes both of them generally uncomfortable, and that's rather a sign."

"It's not much of a match for one of us," said Lord Douglas, though he did not suffer from snobbishness. "But he must be a good chap, because the Eton men of his time all have a good word for him. I was in the pavilion at Lord's when he made all those runs for Oxford in the 'Varsity match, and people were talking about him, and there was no mistaking how pleased they were that he was the man who had made the runs."

"He's very popular with the 'b'hoys,' too, though he's so jolly independent."

"Do you know him well, Archie?"

"Do I know him well, when he and I are Mirry's greatest friends?"

"Well, then, as, after all, this is my own house, I think I'll get you to introduce me."

"I'd love to—thought you knew him."

"No, I don't. I've been very little about since he took over the theatre."

"Well, here goes, then!" said Archie, leading the way to where Mirabel was entertaining Oliver.

"I say, Mirry," he began, "the Governor says he's never met Gray, so I've brought him along to introduce them. I hope you won't mind our breaking into your conversation?"

"Of course not!" Her face said more than her words. She was pleased with Archie's paying this attention to Gray after that Sunday afternoon contretemps. She took over the introduction into her own hands. "Oliver," she said, "I want to introduce you to Lord Douglas, the head of our family. Jim, I want to introduce Mr. Oliver Gray, the faithful friend to whom I owe everything."

The Douglas was no reader of character; he merely knew whether he liked people or not. But this served almost as well, because he could only tolerate straight-grained people. He liked Gray, and was quietly cordial.

Mirabel, wishing them to improve the acquaintance, said, "Take me to have two ices, Archie."

Men are funny things! Archie's friends in the regiment, chiefly of the *jeunesse dorée* who haunted the stalls of the *Babylon*, naturally accompanied him from time to time to his mother's receptions, when he had some reason for gracing them with his presence, and they soon awoke to the fact that the beautiful leading lady of the *Babylon*, who was so inac-

cessible to the patrons of musical drama, was Archie's cousin, and to be found at his mother's receptions. They took to attending them as they attended the theatre. But the notable feature of their attendance was that, whereas, if they could have forced themselves on her at the *Babylon*, they might have made suggestions which would have revolted her, when they met her in Archie's mother's house, they treated her with delightful chivalry. And instead of being asked to their bachelor entertainments, with their other musical-comedy friends, she was asked to entertainments which were perhaps not half as amusing, to which she went with Lady Douglas, to meet their wives and their sisters, though, just to see what it was like, she did once let Archie give a bachelor-party in her honour, on condition that no other woman should be asked except Mrs. Orlando Jebb. Mrs. Jebb was decidedly useful. As soon as she saw which way the cat jumped, she joined Mirabel in a small society of two, dedicated to respectability, at the theatre.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A DAY OF SURPRISES AT BOLINGBROKE HOUSE

THE world was going very well with Mirabel. The world seemed to be going very well altogether, when London awoke on the beautiful twenty-second of July, 1914.

It was true that for two or three days past there had been violent fluctuations and falls on the Stock Exchange, but people had grown accustomed to that during the Balkan wars. The Standard Oil Company might be at the bottom of it, as it was at the bottom of the slump in Mexicans. Nobody troubled about it, except those who suddenly found themselves poorer by hundreds and thousands, if they were compelled to realize. For the rest, people went about their pleasures, if not about their business, with lofty British content.

But that afternoon, towards three o'clock, Gray, who never came on any day except Sunday, was suddenly announced to Mirabel in the drawing-room of Bolingbroke House, where she had been spending the last hour with

Archie. He had not been kissing her; for, apart from loyalty to her husband, she had been afraid to let him kiss her, because she was so in love with him that she dreaded a debacle if once their lips met. But they were sitting very near each other, and obviously indifferent to everything else in earth and heaven.

They started apart guiltily. There was no reason why they should—they had only been living in each other's souls, as the American lady said, and so far as Archie knew, Gray had no more right to feel annoyed than appertained to the fact that he also was a candidate for Mirabel's hand. But instinct made them start. The odd feature in the situation was that Mirabel was obviously glad to see Gray, though she had been surprised by him in a compromising situation.

She jumped up to shake hands with him, blushing, but smiling an honest, undisconcerted welcome.

Archie also shook hands cordially, but without his usual *mens aequa in arduis*.

"I came to speak to you alone, Mirabel," said Gray, "because I have had some very private information, which I promised not to repeat to a third person. Perhaps Avondale won't mind our going to the other end of the room, as it is purely a business matter?"

"No, I'll go, Gray—I can see by your face that it isn't a thing you can tell in half a minute in a whisper. I hope I'm not the cause of it, that's all!"

"Not in the least," said Gray, though he was not a little troubled at the *tête-à-tête* which he had disturbed.

Archie, in truth, was glad to make his escape. There was no question of a scene between him and Gray. He knew Gray well enough by this time to be certain of that. But he felt somehow that he had been acting unhandsomely, and he wanted to go away and hide himself from the eyes of his fellows. He hated being unhandsome.

"Oliver," said Mirabel, going up and laying a hand on his arm, and looking him honestly in the face, "before I hear what you have to say, unless it's something which necessitates wild telegrams this very minute, I have an explanation, which I should like to make."

"I think you'd better hear what I have to say first," he said, although he was on tenterhooks with anxiety about

the scene which he had just witnessed. "If you have any stocks or shares, let me know what they are quickly, so that I can telephone to my brokers about them."

"What on earth do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean, have you any?"

"No. Why do you ask?" she said. "What income I have of my own is paid to me out of the estate of the last Lord Douglas but one."

"Thank God for that!" he said. "Half your principal might have gone already!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that old Löwe, the banker, whose name we make so many jokes about at the theatre, a disreputable old gentleman, who cultivates me because our Chorus is his paradise, has just been to see me, and told me that the reason why shares are falling like chimney-pots in an earthquake—I suppose you don't look at the financial part of the papers, and so haven't noticed what has been going on in the last two or three days?—Well, old Löwe, who is an Austrian, has had private intelligence that the reason why this nine-pin business is going on at the Stock Exchange is that the big financiers, who are in the know, are unloading their securities on the Stock Exchange, because Austria is going to force a war on Serbia at once, and because Germany means it to develop into a universal conflagration. So you see the necessity of acting quickly, if you have got any shares."

"Well, I haven't; I don't know anything about them; I don't know a stock from a share, or a bull from a bear! Have you got many, Oliver?"

"Very few—no investments, just my own little flutters. My money is all invested in theatrical ventures or real estate, except the block of debentures which are invested in the names of trustees, to give me an income to starve on if I ever go 'bung.' But there's going to be war, Mirabel—do you understand that?—war, a European war, perhaps without England—I believe the Germans are reckoning on that! War, ruining everybody! murdering myriads! deliberately arranged by the German War Party!"

He was so disturbed about it that he hardly remembered the trouble of the scene which he had just witnessed. Mirabel had not forgotten it, however.

"I've nothing to say about it, Oliver, nothing! I can't realize it! May I make my confession now?"

"Your confession?" he said, looking at her as if he was too stunned to understand her.

"Yes, my confession! I love that boy who's just left the room."

He started violently. Knowing Archie's reputation, knowing his history, in fact, he dreaded the worst from this announcement. "Don't spare me, Mirabel," he said, desperately. "Tell me right out! let me know everything."

"There's nothing to let you know," she said—"except what I have told you."

"Nothing to let me know? Surely love implies some acts?"

"Not in our case, beyond meeting each other very often, and saying, and leaving unsaid, the same things over and over again."

"Oh, Mirabel, do explain! You can't think how awful it is for me!"

"Well, perhaps there is something to explain. Archie is the ideal husband of whom I have been dreaming all my life, and I am your wife."

"Does he love you as much as you love him?" asked Oliver in the same stunned way.

"More, I truly believe."

"Well, what are you going to do?" he asked, "if you have done nothing so far?"

"Try and live it down," she said; "there's nothing else to be done."

"Is he trying to live it down, too?" he asked, with faint irony.

"He is—honestly," said Mirabel.

"Well, where do I come in? What can I do?" asked Gray.

"Just believe in me, Oliver. Believe that I have been absolutely loyal to my husband, and shall go on trying my hardest. And if ever I fail for the moment, forgive me, and know that I shall go on trying. I love him, Oliver: I can't help it, but I hope that it will wear out in time."

"I'm glad that you've told me the truth, Mirabel. I shall trust you, and if you fail, you need not mind my know-

ing. It will hurt horribly, but I'd rather know than be deceived."

Mirabel gave him the kiss which she had denied to Archie. She had no fears, alas ! of losing her self-control with Oliver. She wished that she could !

CHAPTER XXIX

THE WAR BEGINS : HOW OLIVER GRAY JOINED THE ARMY

"THE LOVER," as he was called in the Green Room of the *Babylon Theatre*, was right. Though he was an absurd-looking old party, with Francis-Joseph whiskers, whom nobody in his leisure hours had ever taken seriously, he was a king in the City.

After proper hypocrisy, first Austria and then Germany gave the order, "Full steam ahead." Great Britain was hurried into war before her cranks had time to organize meetings. They could not hire the Queen's Hall and the Albert Hall, because they were booked up for concerts of German music, and nowhere else could they decide the national interests of the country. There were scenes of the wildest patriotism at the *Babylon Theatre* every night. The audience roared itself hoarse over biographies about the war. This was only natural, because the *Babylon* was the favourite pleasure-resort of dashing soldiers and their chums in civil life. If recruiting sergeants had been stationed at the entrances, as the audience streamed out, they might have made a good haul among the pit-ites. Possibly many of them did enlist on the following day.

One person in the theatre, at any rate, was serious in his patriotism, and that was the proprietor, Oliver Gray. He thought that there was only one thing a man could do, under the circumstances, and that was to go and fight for his country. So, having among the principal patrons of his Green Room a hoary Major-General in the War Office, named Finch-Cocks, he applied to him for aid in getting a commission. The General, happening to preside over some department of the Royal Artillery, put in an application for a commission for him in that branch of the Service.

Other young men, with more influential backing, snapped

up all the commissions in the Royal Horse and Royal Field Artillery. Oliver Gray had to be contented with a commission in the Royal Garrison Artillery, which would have weighed heavily on his spirits if he had not determined to do his duty in whatever capacity the Government were willing to use him. As it was, it was some time before his application was considered. The wheels of the War Office grind slowly, and generally with exceedingly small results.

"Oliver," said Mirabel one Sunday night, about a month afterwards, "I suppose you couldn't get away to join the Army, without upsetting the whole business, and throwing hundreds of people out of work?"

"I hope it isn't as bad as that," he said, "because I sent in my application the very day the war appeared in the newspapers."

"Oh, Oliver, I am glad!" she cried, without a thought of how it might affect her own living. "I was hoping you'd do this! I don't see how any man of the fighting age could bear to do anything else. When war is declared, they ought to run to arms just as the settlers run to arms in the back-woods when their scouts see the Indians coming! I should hate a man of mine not to come forward! Of course Archie's a soldier already, though I don't suppose the Guards will leave London—they're sort of toy-soldiers, aren't they, for providing the King with guards of honour? I expect that's what the Beauties in our stalls go into them for!"

"I believe that's what they are recruited for, but in most of our recent wars we had to use them because we were short of men, and they generally came in for the hottest fighting, and always showed themselves the finest Infantry in the world. But we shall have to raise such a lot of soldiers for this war that perhaps they'll be left at home for their proper job."

"Oh, I hope they'll send them out," she said. "The Aristocracy of England don't do much in time of peace, except enjoy themselves, so one wants them in time of war to throw back true to the military caste, from which families like ours sprang. I hope there won't be a Douglas of the proper age who is not fighting."

"Archie will go to the front if he gets half a chance," said Gray. "He's a true Douglas."

"Thank you for that, Oliver; it comes well from you."

"If it wasn't for the people it would throw out, I'd shut the theatre down as fast as the notices could go out. In the time of war I think there ought to be nothing but war—I think it's an outrage, having places like the *Babylon*!"

"I don't agree with you! When men aren't fighting, they want as bright and merry a change as possible. I should let the comedies and musical comedies and music-halls go on, full blast, and should only shut down the tragedies and the Dean of St. Paul's."

"Anyhow, Mirabel, I am glad that you approve of my going! You couldn't get Lord Douglas, or any friend of Lady Douglas's, to hurry things up at the War Office, could you?"

"I don't think he's very popular there: he's an out-and-out Lord Roberts man, who's been agitating for National Service, and finding fault with every War Office official ever since Lord Roberts started! But Janet might know some actress who could pull strings at the War Office."

"Like my old Major-General! I'm sorry that nothing'll satisfy me except fighting. I believe I could do more good with holding open-air services of the *Babylon* Company in favour of recruiting. And even then, there might be nobody to take the names of the recruits. I hear there are lots of men who have been waiting as long as I have, though they only want to enlist as Tommies. The authorities want as many men as they can get, but they can only take a certain number of names down each day, because they try and take the recruits for the whole of London in three or four sheds the size of bathing-machines! If they turned the job over to the theatre-managers, they could manage a million smoothly. But the people they employ are better suited to be registrars of births and deaths in a country parish! Oh, the whole thing tires me! Everything depends on the Fleet. I don't see how the Army can ever be ready."

Two nights later—it was on Tuesday—in a long yellow envelope, he received a notice informing him that he had been appointed a Second-Lieutenant in the Royal Garrison Artillery, and that he was to report himself at Woolwich as soon as possible. Enclosed was what looked like a washing-list, but was in reality a list of the clothing allowed to each officer on active service, which made no allowance for the clothes ever being washed, it was so meagre.

Gray got the letter towards the end of the first act, and knowing that Mirabel did not appear till a quarter of an hour after the curtain had risen in the second act, he did a thing which he had never done since she came to the theatre, and which was flat against his promise. He sent a note to be handed to her when she came off the stage. "Can I come to your dressing-room for a moment? I have something important to tell you."

She sent back a message at once: "Miss Douglas says 'Yes, certainly.'"

He knocked at the door.

"Come in!" said the soft voice. "Come in, Oliver," she said, as he appeared at the door. "How do you like my arrangement of the room?"

As she had had it done by the same firm as decorated her house, and a lofty screen across the room concealed every detail of preparations for dressing, and left the front part a delightful Oriental lounge, it seemed a great pity that no visitor had ever entered it but Archie that once, and Old Mac.

"Ripping!" he said.

"It was Paula's idea, having a divan, so that I could rest whenever I was not wanted on the stage, though she's never seen the place. Try it, won't you? You may just as well be comfy while you're talking!"

The gracious words—her whole manner—showed that she was condoning the breach in the compact, that she knew that he would not have broken it without good reason. He handed her the letter; she sat down beside him to read it.

"George, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India, etc.

"To our Trusty and well-beloved John Gray, Greeting. We, reposing a special Trust and Confidence in your Loyalty, Courage, and good Conduct, do by these Presents Constitute and Appoint you to be an Officer in Our Royal Garrison Artillery, from the sixth day of September, 1914.

"Given in Our Court at St. James's, the fifth day of September, 1914, in the Fifth Year of Our Reign, by His Majesty's Command.

"John Gray, Second Lieutenant,
"Royal Garrison Artillery."

With this he received orders to provide himself with the uniforms and equipment laid down in the schedule enclosed, and to report himself at Woolwich as soon as possible.

"Oh, Oliver, I am glad!" she said, when she had finished reading it, and added quickly, "Glad for everything, except losing you! I do like you awfully in every other way, and you have been so loyal."

He made a movement to rise.

"No," she said, "my dresser won't be here for another five minutes! Stay and talk till she comes, if you've nothing better to do."

"I'm glad to do that," he said simply, "because I hope to get to Woolwich by Friday, and goodness knows how long it will be before I shall see you again."

"Oh, you're sure to have some chance of seeing me between this and then!"

"Do you mean it, Mirabel?"

"Of course I do!" she said, and her graciousness meant even more than her words, to which she gave a touch of flippancy to hide feeling—"till you go the Sunday rule is suspended, like the free-list. And, Oliver. . . ."

"What, dear?"

"Miss Mirabel Douglas is going to do what she has never done before—allow herself to be kissed in her dressing-room."

CHAPTER XXX

HOW MIRABEL TRIED TO REALIZE HERSELF

WHEN Oliver Gray had been at Woolwich a few days he was informed that he would be transferred with two other subalterns and a small draft of men to Westernport on the Monday week.

In spite of the chastening effect of Paula's presence, Mirabel was so affectionate to Gray on those two Sundays before he went down to Westernport that Paula said to her, when he had bid a long good-night, and left on the first Sunday:

"Why don't you marry him, and have done with it?"

Partly because she was afraid of betraying the fact that she was already married to Gray, if she started trying to defend herself, partly because she thought that it would be a

good opportunity to let Paula know her ideals about marriage, Mirabel said :

" I should like to marry a man with whom I can be absolutely in love, and who would be willing to devote our lives to the pursuit of happiness and beauty, as the ancient Greeks did."

" My dear, I don't think that you have read much about the ancient Greeks. It is true that they devoted their lives to the pursuit of happiness and beauty ; but they did not do it with their wives, whom they locked up in something not very different from a harem, while they went for intellectual, as well as other enjoyment, to the *hetæræ*, the geishas of Ancient Greece."

" Did they ? " said Mirabel. " I hate them ! "

" There's nothing to hate about them," said Paula. " Their wives controlled the establishments for carrying on the family, and the *hetæræ*, the 'companions,' who would not have done this efficiently, served to amuse them."

" I don't believe it ! The Greeks, if anybody, knew that beauty is truth—truth beauty."

" I'm sure they didn't," said Paula. " The Spartans used to kill ugly children. And you stultify that pretentious falsehood in your own life—Truth is Oliver, and Beauty is Archie ! "

" Do you really think so ? "

" Yes," said Paula. " Your whole behaviour convinces me that Oscar Wilde's saying that 'it is better to be good-looking than it is to be good' is far truer than the other."

" You have no conscience, Paula."

" I hope not ! Conscience is only another name for moral cowardice—unless it's your sort of conscience ! "

" And what is that, pray ? "

" Conscience is the Pharisee's excuse ; and Phariseeism is mostly a form of egotism."

" I am a Pharisee, I suppose ? "

" I never doubted it. You wouldn't keep Oliver in torture if you weren't."

" I'm sure that there isn't a person in the whole theatre who would lay want of kindness to my charge ! "

" It's easy to be kind to people who don't count ! You need not consider whether you are spoiling them, for one thing,

and it has no consequences to yourself, for another. You know that you daren't be as kind as you want to Archie!"

"It would not be right," said Mirabel.

"I know," said Paula. "A person who takes a high moral tone has no right to be happy. Prevention is better than cure, and insight is better than foresight!"

"All this talking does not affect the fact that I want to do what is right."

"I shouldn't have thought it!" said Paula. "You want an excuse for doing what you like: to do right in your case is as easy as falling off a tree!"

"Do you mean that I'm to fall, and marry Oliver?"

"I didn't say that it was falling: I said that it was as easy as falling."

"I don't see the difference."

"Well, if I said that you were as good as married to Oliver, it would not be the same thing as saying that you were married to him."

Mirabel blushed to the very roots of her hair. Could Paula suspect? At all events, she must try and appear not to take the hint. She took refuge in woman's time-worn answer to an unanswerable argument.

"I think you're very rude!"

"I should think it an honour to be married to Oliver, myself," said Paula.

"It may be—but that isn't the question which concerns me. My life is a sacrament."

"If you asked me, I should say that ever since I have known him, Oliver's life has been much more of a sacrament than yours!"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he consecrates his life to you, and you don't consecrate yours to anything."

"I consecrate it to my art."

"You only do your level best for it, and I'm sure that Topsy Perks does her best—such as it is. You don't fast or get up at three in the morning to do spiritual exercises for it, which even the laziest monk does for his religion. I am afraid that I don't see the sacrament in it, unless doing exercises to perfect your figure, when you come home tired from the theatre, is a consecration!"

"Put it in another way—I am trying to realize myself.

You know the saying—‘the realization of oneself is the prime object in life.’”

“I know the saying well enough. I know where you got it from—my shilling Oscar Wilde calendar. But you haven’t seen the meaning of it.”

“And what is the meaning that I don’t realize?”

“What you have to realize is the object for which you were born. There is a function which each class of human being can do better than others. We authors call it the *message*. You will excuse my saying that I don’t see what your *message* has been so far, except to facilitate the turning of history into musical comedy. Tell me—I’m not trying to be funny—what you think your *message* is? I hope it isn’t to wreck poor Oliver’s life!”

“What’s yours?” said Mirabel, at a loss for an answer.

“To shrivel shams,” said Paula promptly.

A gleam of humour, such as did not often illuminate Mirabel, saved her.

“I think it must be: you’ve completely shrivelled me!”

Paula laughed, too, but she proceeded: “Talking of life, Mirry, I don’t consider that you do live—Lord Douglas lives, but you only exist, and you spend the portion of your existence which is at your disposal in trying to avoid committing yourself!”

Mirabel winced so distinctly that Paula noticed it, and said, “I think I’d better stop, because I don’t want to hurt you—I’m only enjoying an argument.”

“Oh, go on,” said Mirabel. “I’m very interested, though you do ‘get me on the raw,’ as Archie says, every now and then. How does Jim live, if I don’t?”

“Because, recognizing that he has not sufficient ability to make himself felt in the House of Lords, he makes his political influence felt by putting himself at the head of movements which precede legislation.”

“I see,” said Mirabel, as if she did not see.

“But, Mirry,” said Paula, and her voice grew full of affection as she said it, “don’t think that I am making light of your being so serious on the subject of your marriage. In your profession, especially, people don’t give half enough forethought to their marriages, and a girl who is as beautiful as you, and has such prospects, cannot be too careful about her marriage. I only think that to give it so much forethought

is rather cruel to Oliver, who is a great deal more worth marrying than Archie, even if the marriage is not such a splendid one. You are arresting his development by keeping him on probation so long, when he has reformed splendidly. It is not natural for such a man to be kept on tenterhooks for a woman's whims. It is natural for him to continue his reformed life, and he will do it—but it's not natural for him to behave as if he did not want to marry you, when he is dying to marry you. This pretence is as unfair as it is foolish."

"I want to live my own life," said Mirabel, reciprocating the sudden change in Paula's tone so little that she spoke almost sullenly.

"In other words, you want to be thoroughly selfish about it!"

"I can't love him."

"Then why are you so affectionate to him?"

"So as to send him away happy."

"Why not do it genuinely?"

"I have tried hard, but I can't do it."

"Oh, well," said Paula, "perhaps absence will make the heart grow fonder! It's a pity you're such a good actress."

CHAPTER XXXI

ROUND TABLE FORT AND FIRST DAYS IN THE ARMY

THE midnight express to Westernport was nearing its destination. Gray and the two subalterns who were with him, Peter Worboys and Tom Young, had merely turned in their sleep and grunted when the train banged into Exeter, and pulled up with a sudden jerk and clangor in the early hours of the morning. At Plymouth it was daylight, and there was so much turning-out of officers from their own sleeping-carriage that in self-defence they got up and dressed.

There was not much "express" after that, and it was well on towards mid-day before they got to the newly-created Cornish fortress of Westernport, which had a bay like Torquay, and a many-branched estuary like the Dart.

Their destination was the Island fort known as Round Table, supposed to have been the site of King Arthur's palace,

but which doubtless got its name from the fact that it was a high round rock with a flat top, with galleries cut in its cliffs which, in the days of muzzle-loaders and round shot, was a practically impregnable fortress. It lay off the entrance to the bay, at the head of which, at the mouth of the river, stood the considerable watering-place of Westernport, where Gray and Mirabel had spent their honeymoon.

Westernport gave them a welcome, for there was an R.E. Captain at the station, named Chaster, who announced that he had come to see them and their draft over to the Island, and a couple of sappers, who came to wheel their luggage across to the quay on the R.E. lorry, in case they could not find an outside porter.

"There is a duty-boat here now," he said, "unless you want to get anything in the town before you go, in which case you'll find another one at half-past five. If you have anything to get, you'd better get it, because you'll only have leave every third day, and if it's rough the boat may not run on your day. One of you'll be enough to take the draft over."

Gray at once volunteered to do this; but Worboys, obedient to his instincts—one of which was always to take a good thing when he was offered it—thought there were a few things which he had better get, one of which was a whisky, and persuaded Young to accompany him. Gray was not sorry; Captain Chaster and he were so nearly of an age that they were likely to be better company without these two recently-hatched school-boys. Captain Chaster did not conceal his pleasure in making Gray's acquaintance. Gray did not, of course, give him any clue as to his identity, but Island forts are confined; and the officers at Round Table were mostly very young, or oldish men who had left the service and come back to it for the war. The Major, for instance, was a man of sixty, and the R.A. Captain was an oldish man for his years. There was no Adjutant, and there were no Infantry officers except subalterns.

Up to this, the only real companion for Captain Chaster had been the Doctor, a young Edinburgh specialist.

When they reached the Island, an orderly came up to Captain Chaster, and said, "The Major's compliments, sir, and would you take the new officers up to see him when they arrive?"

The Major, a jovial country gentleman, who had been out of the service for twenty years, came down to the steps of the Mess to meet them. He, too, was evidently impressed with the new addition to his officers, asked him into the Mess to have a drink, and enquired if he played picquet.

"Everything, sir," said Gray.

"Well, Gray," said the Major, "I'll try and make things as easy for you as possible, but, of course, if you've only just joined—and I understand that it is the case——"

"Yes, sir."

"You'll have to acquire your Infantry-drill as well as the business of an Artilleryman, and that means drill, drill, drill at first. But we shall make things as unirksome as possible."

Even without the hint which had been conveyed to him at the instance of General Finch-Cocks, he would have been inclined to let Gray down as easily as possible, as a man of position, who ought to be spared ridiculous situations.

"I'm quite ready to go through anything that's necessary to make me efficient, Major—my one desire is to be a good soldier, and to be of as much use to my country as I can."

"Heavens! I wish there were some more of you," said Major Hyslop. "The one desire of most of 'em seems to be to go ashore!"

Then he looked round the Mess-room, and seeing the rather senior subaltern who had charge of the Infantry on the Island, he called out to him, "Primrose, I want to introduce Gray," and he added *sotto voce*, when the Infantryman came up, "Gray is in the unfortunate position of having only just joined, and needing to be taught everything. I want you to do as much as you can towards teaching him the Infantry-drill. He isn't quite the man one cares to see a sergeant handling like an ordinary recruit." Having whispered this, he introduced them, "Mr. Gray, Mr. Primrose."

Primrose, a pleasant, stolid man, who was a great golfer, said pleasantly, "I'll look after him, sir. I'll show him his quarters if you like, sir. What quarters have you given him?"

"Well, there's only one single room vacant, and I suppose you will like a single room, eh, Gray?"

"I don't mind, sir," said Gray. "I am out to take what comes."

"That's a right spirit," said the Major, "but I think you'd better have it. Show him to it, Primrose, will you? No. 1."

"Yes, sir."

"You'll have what comes if you take that room," said Primrose, when they got outside. "He doesn't know why it's vacant—a large room like that, when everybody wants a single room. He's never seen it, because it's opposite the Sergeant's kitchen, and he doesn't like being thought to pry. He's a nice chap, but so indulgent that he needs a good sharp Adjutant to look into things. Over in the town there's the wife of one of our Sergeants, who has the vegetable contract for the whole Island. She does us rather well, but her husband's the man who has to check the supplies as they come in, so it might work very badly." He stopped suddenly, for they were opposite the Sergeant's kitchen.

"Where's Polson?" he asked.

"Here, sir," said a big fine gunner, coming forward.

"Is No. 1 open?"

"Yes, sir; mind the water."

No. 1 was one of the largest "quarters" in the fort, but half the room was wasted, because it was flooded with sea-water. Whenever it was rough the sea came in, and its habits were so notorious that no officer would have it, and Polson had not even taken the trouble to remove the lagoon left by the last storm.

"The inner part of the room is dry, though, I believe," said Primrose, "but unless you're very particular about having a room to yourself, I shouldn't take it."

"I daresay I should get over the sea coming into the room," said Gray. "But I don't want to be alone and keep up my civilian habits: I want to be with other people and pick up the run of things."

"Very sound. Well, if you'll go back to the Mess, I'll nose round, and find where there is a bed vacant. It's pretty tight quarters, when you have about four hundred men in a place that was built to hold forty. I sometimes feel as if I was on board ship."

The Mess was empty when Gray went in. He picked up a pile of old *Tatlers* to pass the time, and the first thing he

noticed in them was a portrait of Mirabel, labelled "The Aristocracy in Musical Comedy—Miss Mirabel Douglas, cousin of the Earl of Douglas." A paragraph underneath told how he had discovered her. He felt thankful that they had not finished up by giving his portrait underneath it.

Primrose did not keep him long. He said, "There's a bed in Mitchell's quarters, and a bed in Charlton's, and one of you three will have to take 'Sea-view.' "

"Well, I don't mind, if it worries the others. I'm pretty hardy, and I've had a lot of wet work. We'll wait and see what they say."

"All right. I'm afraid I must leave you. It's almost lunch-time, and I must go and see my fellows dismissed."

"Are they drilling?" asked Gray, in surprise at Primrose not being there if they were.

"Yes," he said. "There's only enough of them for a Colour-sergeant to handle."

"Don't you superintend things yourself?" asked Gray.

"Of course, I have a look at them every now and then."

"Well, don't bother about what the Major said about me, if you wouldn't be there naturally. I shall find my legs all right."

"Oh, if I've got you and the yearlings to look after, I shan't mind being there," said Primrose, who was as innocent of guile as Nathaniel. "Only I get fed up with listening to the Colour-sergeant putting the Tommies through. I want to fall him out and drill him in his h's."

Just before lunch was served, Captain Chaster brought the Doctor up to introduce him to the newcomer. The Doctor recognized the type of man he was at once, and the Doctor was a civilian who was only just getting into Army ways himself, and wanted to do what he could for a fellow-victim.

After enquiring what Gray had done about quarters, he said, "He'd better take that other bed in our room, Chaster."

"Yes," agreed Chaster warmly, and added, to Gray, "It's a tight squeeze—just better than being in a tent, that's all. But we can look after you."

"I shall be most grateful," said Gray, "but I shall be crowding you two chaps out. I'm sure that third bed is never used, and you're only doing it out of kindness."

"Kindness to ourselves," said the Doctor, who was a

Scotchman. " If there had been four of you instead of three in this draft, we should have had our third man, willy-nilly, and the same if another man comes along now."

" Well done, Heriot ! " said Chaster. " Will you come, Gray ? "

" Only too thankful ! " he said.

When lunch was over Gray said to Primrose, " What time shall I be wanted ? "

" Oh, we shan't trouble you to-day : you'll want some time to settle in."

" I shan't want any time to settle in : all my worldly belongings are packed into a uniform-case and a hold-all."

" Well, I'm damned ! " said Primrose. " Of course, you can have an outing, if you're looking forward to it. The squad starts at two ; I'll take you to it."

In storming an enemy's trench you could not have wanted a better Regimental officer than Robert Primrose. He had never seen fear, and he had the swift presence of mind in anticipating and getting out of a trap which a great batsman shows at cricket. He was hardy, he was cheery, he was thoroughly unselfish in danger, but you could not persuade him to take preparations seriously. His men could entrench as little as they liked when they went to France, as far as he was concerned—in fact, it is not certain whether he would not think entrenching cowardly. He was a stupid bull-dog, was Robert Primrose, but with all the magnificent courage and tenacity of the breed.

He went with Gray to where the squad was drilling, partly from *noblesse oblige*, partly because he had told the Major that he would.

" Colour-sergeant," he said, calling him aside, " the Major says that you are to treat Lieutenant Gray with consideration. He isn't a duffer who wants letting down easily—nothing of the sort ; he's very keen. You know what the Major means."

" Yes, sir—I've got to remember that he's an officer."

" Precisely," said Primrose, knowing that the Sergeant was given to lapses in this direction, though he was a very good instructor. Then he went back to Gray, and the Colour-sergeant accompanied him, and saluted.

Gray, with rehearsals in his mind, proceeded to say exactly the opposite to what Primrose had said. " If you make me

learn my job in double-quick time, I don't care how you treat me," was the effect of what he said.

The Colour-sergeant, who was a poor sort of man apart from his proficiency at his job, took good stock of the cut of Gray's uniform. He was the man whose wife contracted for the vegetables; he knew money when he saw it, and he said, "Begging your pardon, sir—if you want to get on very quickly, you'd better let me give you an hour's private every day, and put it into practice when we're drilling."

Gray jumped at the idea, and Primrose took leave of him very cordially, before he was compelled to witness any other overt act of foolishness.

"The chap's a regular mug!" he said to himself. "But what a ripping chap!"

Although the Colour-sergeant, with prospective fees in his mind, was almost unpleasantly respectful to Gray, the great manager could not help feeling a sad fool while he was going through his rehearsal, so much worse than the rest of the squad, who happened to be Tommies of about a month's training. The only thing which cheered him was that he saw that any fool could do what they were doing with sufficient rehearsing—that it was all a matter of training and habit.

Half an hour later Primrose came back, and calling to the Colour-sergeant, asked him in a voice inaudible to the squad. "Well, what do you make of him?"

"The best recruit I ever had, sir"—which, of course, was absolutely true, because when a man of Gray's intelligence, accustomed to the most accurate drilling of the stage, makes the British Infantry drill the object of intense study, he deserves to succeed.

"Come and have a whisky and soda, Gray," said the C.O. of the Infantry at Round Table. "The Colour-sergeant gives an A1 report of you!"

"I'll come and have a cigarette with you if I may," said Gray. "I never drink between meals." And, of course, in his position he would have been a corpse by this time if he did. Having whiskies with the patrons was one of Old Mac's duties and perquisites. They had no more effect on him or his health than cigarettes, and he consumed them as other men consume cigarettes. They made him no more affable or quarrelsome than he usually was, and as every

arrangement he made was subject to Gray's veto, it did not signify how affable he was.

A little before six o'clock the duty-boat brought in Worboys, who had been enjoying himself very much, and Young. Gray met them at the slip, and brought them up to the Mess.

"Hallo, old man!" said Worboys. "It" (he meant Westernport) "isn't a bad little hole!"

"No, I think it's a very good place," said Gray, who had made it his headquarters for yachting one summer, and on another occasion had spent the loveliest month in his life there. "It's about the prettiest place in England, you know."

"I wasn't thinking of that," said Worboys, quite frankly. "I meant that it's fairly lively for its size."

"Lucky, isn't it?" said Gray.

"Yes," said Worboys, "it makes a lot of difference to a chap when he's suddenly got to give up London, and all which that means!"

It was difficult for the owner of the *Babylon*, sick at heart at having to leave Mirabel, to refrain from a good-natured smile; but *noblesse oblige* saved him, and he said, "I'll just take you up to the Major for a minute, if he's in his room, and ask him about your quarters. Which of you two chaps is senior?"

"I am," said Worboys, as complacently as if he had a further term of service to his credit, whereas, in point of fact, he was only senior to Young by the amount that W comes before Y, they having been gazetted on the same day.

Gray felt sorry to think what a much better impression Worboys, with his fine physique, would make on the Major, than Young, who really had brains, and might develop into a brilliant officer.

The Major, however, was not in his office. He was lying down. But he had left word that the new officers were to select their quarters, and report themselves to him at Mess.

Worboys was so pleased with "Sea-view," which he instantly accepted, that Gray knew that it must have some extrinsic merit in his mind, and when he got him alone he asked him.

"Can't you see, my dear chap," he said, "that it's on the ground-floor, and the sea-wall? You've only got to tip

the sentry, if there is one, and then you can skip ashore any night you want to, if you arrange to have a boat lying off!"

"I shouldn't like to get into a boat off those rocks," said Gray.

"When I'm out for it," said Worboys, "I don't mind anything."

"I expect you'll find it harder than you think," said Gray.

"I haven't thought it out yet," said Worboys, "but anyone could see the possibilities of that room."

"Except when I have any business to take me ashore, you can have my leave as well as your own, if you promise not to try," said Gray.

"It wouldn't be the same thing," said Worboys, who was still suffering from the Fifth-Form spirit.

* * * * *

Day after day the man whose opportunities of seeing life had made him the envy of the first four rows of the stalls at his theatre, could be seen plodding conscientiously through his Infantry drill, first with the sergeant-major alone, and then with the squad or—at his own request—with the recruits who had been selected for punishment. Day after day you could see him taking the same pains over his gun drill. He was glad to drill as much as ever he could, not only because he learned his work, but because it prevented him from thinking, and made him tired enough to sleep on his days for sleep and drill. The longing for Mirabel made it easy for him to keep awake every third day, when he had to spend twenty-four hours in the Battery Commander's Post, watching out to sea for the enemy.

He missed nothing else. Now that he had a woman whom he really loved, and had known the happiness of married life, he was glad to be away from that auction-room of beauty, the *Babylon Theatre*. Its whole atmosphere, of beautiful women hunting for money, and the dissipated wealthy hunting for beauty, disgusted and distressed him. Even Mirabel, unapproachable and discreet as she was, could not help the hot blasts of that impure atmosphere searing her. Sometimes he reflected that it was a ridiculous attitude for him to take up; he made his living by the theatre, of which these features were the special attraction, and if

Mirabel had been like the other women whom he had loved, she would have been the leader in every revel.

Mirabel unconsciously kept up the cult by her attentiveness, for though she could not contemplate living with him without horror, she devoted a good part of the time which she would have given to him on Sunday afternoons to writing him a letter, and wrote during the week, too, whenever she had anything particular to say. There was no romance in the letters ; they were just news, very bright and amusing news, over the collecting and writing of which time and care had been spent. And there was always affection, though not love, in the message with which they concluded.

In sending her his replies, which he was expected to limit in number, he enclosed the envelope in another addressed to his lawyers, who had instructions to send it on by the next post. This was because he practically never went ashore, and did not wish the postmaster on the Island to notice how many letters he wrote to "Miss Douglas, Bolingbroke House, The Mall, Chiswick."

The other officers on the Island were astounded by his never wanting to leave it, but they had no objection to the habit, because he was always willing to take anyone's duty, even the arduous duty of the twenty-four hours' watch in the Battery Commander's Post, which he found quite interesting. Most of the officers regarded him as an amiable lunatic. He never told them anything about himself to combat the opinion, and they none of them bothered about his reason for being so amiable, except Dr. Heriot, who, being a really eminent medical man, and sharing a room with him, could not help studying the pathology of the case. He could see that some—to Gray—great event must be governing the procedure of this young man's life, for he was not of the type of the slave to duty, but rather of the class which combines prowess in sports with skylarking. As a room-mate, as a companion at Mess, he found him one of the nicest men he had ever met. He knew that there must be some reason why he should be sorry for him.

CHAPTER XXXII

BARREN DAYS

THERE was something wanting in Mirabel Douglas's life while Oliver Gray was away at Westernport.

It was true that she had Archie, with whom she was so desperately in love. But platonic friendships are poor sport for Puritans, especially when Plato has a mind like a Punch-and-Judy show, with Punch practical jokes and repartee as its only manifestations of activity.

If Mirabel had been willing to have an affair with Archie, she could, while her conscience was stunned, have been a deliriously happy woman. Physically, it was not easy for a human being to be more charming than Archie ; he made love adorably. As a husband, licensed to make love to her, she would have found him completely satisfactory.

Paula was quite right when she said to her : " By all the rules of the game, you ought to marry Oliver Gray ; but for your own happiness you ought to marry your Archie. What you want in a husband is someone whom you adore, so that you will be satisfied with his making love to you, without demanding any other qualities in him whatever, except that he should be a credit to you. I don't say that your Archie would be a credit to you in the ordinary sense of the word, but he would take a first prize if they had shows for men like dog-shows, and in the ordinary course of events, he will one day be a first-class Earl. You couldn't ask more ! "

" I don't know where your judgment has gone to, Paula ! I'm just as fond of the higher side of life as you are ! "

" You may be, but you don't want it from your husband. You might, and I suppose would, go to it for consolation when you hadn't got him ; but when you had him, the higher life might go to heaven ! "

" A nice animal you make me out ! "

" Not at all ! You are very selective ; the man you have chosen and won for a lover is physically as perfect as you could want ; but you won't let him be your lover unless he is your husband, because you are a Puritan by nature. If

you married Archie, you would only turn your mind to intellectual pursuits when you hadn't got him to play with. Devotion to a husband is most respectable in a married woman, but it is often a mighty poor compliment to her intellect!"

Mirabel felt very angry with Paula, but she knew that she was telling her the truth. She wanted Archie to be her husband, because she was in love with his physical charms. But he could not be her husband, and she was much too puritanical to have a lover, so they were only beautiful pictures to each other. That they were satisfied to remain at this point spoke highly for both of them, especially for Archie, who, at twenty years old, had already enjoyed a wide experience of what may be accomplished by getting in the thin edge of the wedge.

There was one prime difference between her and Archie. He wanted to be left alone with her, and she dreaded being left alone with him. She could feast her eyes on him and laugh at his *naïveté* quite well with Paula present, and as Paula was so witty, and being shocked was with her a form of flirtation, Archie was much more amusing if he had her to stimulate him. At Bolingbroke House he might not have a *tête-à-tête* except by accident ; it was only in his own home that there was a reasonable probability of it. And Mirabel was always on her guard, even there, because she was afraid of herself.

But Archie was so genuinely in love that he endured all things just to be in the society of his beautiful cousin.

At the theatre they had given up troubling about her. She was affable and unselfish in stage matters, and generous in her subscriptions to the fund for helping the necessitous, which was a feature of the *Babylon*.

People at the stage-door, as well as in the Company, had left off attempting familiarities with her since her position in Society became known, and very few tried to make friends with her, since her tastes were so different.

Her position at the theatre with the public rested on a more solid basis. Every time she appeared, with her voice and her beauty and her *simpatica*, she was the popular idol.

On the whole, she was rather lonely. The people of whom she really made friends were mostly among the authors she met at Lady Douglas's, or in Paula's parties at their own

house. Only authors and artists were interested in her Italy, and artists do not travel so intelligently as authors, nor are they so intelligent to talk to. She did not make as much progress with authors as she wished, because they were shy of her. It was difficult for the ordinary author to realize that the beautiful Miss Douglas, the star of the *Babylon Theatre*, and belonging to the high aristocracy by birth, could be interested in surroundings of plain living and high thinking. Whereas, in reality she found plain surroundings restful after the glare of the footlights and the splendour of Lanarkshire House, and had dreamed like an author all her life.

Their parties became as brilliant as any in Bohemia. Paula positively scintillated with wit and charm at their success. But Mirabel soon began to find them Dead Sea fruit, for Archie was only allowed to come to them on condition that he devoted himself to other people. Mirabel had to be hostessing, and did not wish their names to be connected, as they certainly would have been if many chance people had seen Archie as devout as he generally was.

It was not so bad for him as it was for her, because he had the pleasure of looking at her, admired and courted by everybody, and indifferent, as he knew, to them all. But she had no time to look at him, since she was occupied with her duties.

What she really missed Gray for most was that she could allow herself to be nicer to him than she could to Archie. He was her husband, and there was no fear of her losing her head over him, while she was puritanically afraid of losing her head over Archie. It would have been such a relief to be able to let herself go a little.

Even her success at the theatre brought no excitement to her. For it would lead to nothing more. She was already an established favourite with the public, and already married. She saw no reason why her life should be any different for the next ten years. She had given up her life to her art—and she found it becoming very like a life devoted to business. She had, in fact, made a business success.

The fresh celebrities, when they came, were introduced to Paula Maitland, the novelist, and the actress whose beauty was in everyone's mouth. They found the novelist a most charming and distinguished-looking woman, whose dresses were inspirations, and whose conversation sparkled with

wit and the play of fascinating features, and they remained round her in a sort of court.

It was only very important people, like the greatest authors and subaltern friends of Archie's who had made their acquaintance at Lady Douglas's, who neglected her for Mirabel.

Her greatest admirer of all was a silent worshipper, Dr. Cantelupe, Principal of the Royal Lyceum of Music, who scribbled down her witticisms on his shirt-cuff.

"I've so little to say except when I have a strong motive for speaking, that I don't see how you can be bothered with me," he said to her one day.

"On the contrary, dear Dr. Cantelupe," replied Paula, "a really distinguished man who does not want to do any of the talking is the best card a hostess can have in her hand!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE C.S.A.S.A. AND THE W.R.O.

IF Mirabel had been a man, she would not have felt so lost as she felt after Gray had gone down to Westernport. But unfortunately women's fingers are so full of instinct that they can work without the mind, and very often without the sight, being devoted to what they are doing. In common with others of their class, Lord and Lady Douglas threw their wealth and time into various schemes for performing services to their country, which the Government failed to perform, chief among them the C.S.A.S.A. and the W.R.O., which they founded and to a large extent financed.

The work which Lord Douglas had done on movements for years past was of immense assistance in organizing these two associations, because most of the people who had been associated with him and Lady Douglas in these movements were only too glad to help one whose co-operation had been the making of their own societies. The C.S.A.S.A. was the Crippled Soldiers and Sailors' Association, and the W.R.O. was the Women's Recruiting Organization.

It was suggested to Paula, who, before she went to live with Mirabel, had been a prominent member of the Women's

Social and Political Union, that she should get the right women to help Lady Douglas to form a Women's Recruiting Organization.

Paula chose helpers of two classes : half of them she drew from the W.S.P.U.—women who were good organizers, and (except where, like Mrs. Pankhurst, they had already taken a notably patriotic part in recruiting) women who before the war had not alienated public opinion by their extremeness ; the other half she drew from the stage, and them she obtained through Mirabel.

Mirabel was filled with dismay when Paula suggested that she must obtain them.

" But outside of my own theatre I hardly know a single actor or actress to whom you or Janet have not introduced me, Paula ! "

" That does not signify in the least," said Paula. " It is easy for you as leading lady of one theatre to write to the prominent actresses at other theatres, and ask them to join Lady Douglas's committee for a national cause ; everyone of them will accept. They are very public-spirited—they like publicity."

Mirabel was astonished by the cordiality of their replies ; most of them wanted her to have lunch or tea with them, and talk it over—partly to make her acquaintance, because they were so interested in a woman who had stepped straight into the position of leading lady, and been more than successful in filling it. Nor did it diminish their interest that she was on the footing of a daughter in the household of such a very great lady as her cousin, Lady Douglas. Those who knew her welcomed the opportunity of getting to know her better. Her reputation for straightlacedness was useful.

What leading actresses could do in a Woman's Recruiting Organization was not at first apparent to Mirabel, but when she discovered that entertainments were at the root of every meeting, she understood, and to her greater surprise, found herself one of the chief assets.

The women of the W.R.O. set about recruiting as if it was a series of charity concerts. They gave grand variety entertainments, at which the Actresses' Committee provided the performers, male and female, all over the country. In between the items of the programme, recruiting speeches

were delivered by clever woman-orators, who showed great quickness in seizing on the idiosyncrasies of the audience.

They called for recruits at the meetings ; they called for local war-workers at the meetings ; and organized the plans for the local canvassing, for which a swarm of the wounded who were too crippled for other employments were told off. These men who had been crippled in battle for their country pleaded the need for recruits and munitions more eloquently than anyone else could have done, and were assured of a welcome everywhere. Both they and the performers were paid a fair wage. It was only in London that - the stars who gave performances without payment could appear, and did appear, frequently—no one more frequently than Mirabel, whose voice and beauty made her almost the greatest draw, especially with the wounded men, who were helping in the entertainment. She longed to reciprocate by telling them that she had a husband a soldier. She never felt so warmly to Oliver as on these occasions.

Though Lady Douglas's and Paula's and Mirabel's days were not so eaten up as those of the secretarial staffs, they led days busy and active, as they had never led before. Only those who have conducted a great war-movement can know how crowded their days were.

Lord Douglas was equally busy at the C.S.A.S.A., seeing the visitors whom the General Secretary considered it useful that he should see—visitors who came to offer help of one kind and another, and who took it as a compliment that he should see them in person. He was useful, also, in calling on public officials who had to give permissions or facilities for the work of the Association. But, gradually, as the immense usefulness of the Association manifested itself, his personal interference was less and less needed. The subscriptions came in automatically, and it was only occasionally that he had to make personal application to any official.

As time drew on, seeing that he was not seeking for the *kudos* which accrued to him from the success of the movement, he sought fresh opportunities for usefulness, and found them in taking charge of one of the Government Remount Depots, for which he was very suited, having the double experience of a cavalry officer and a breeder and owner of race-horses, who had won most of the great racing events in his time.

It was characteristic of him that no matter how long his day at the Remount Depot had been, he always looked in at the C.S.A.S.A. on his way home, to do any work which needed his personal attention.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE STORM : AND AN ANGEL'S VISIT

CHRISTMAS EVE, 1914, fell on a Thursday. Major Hyslop was sitting in his little office in the Island fort, which naturally, for observation purposes, faced seawards. The windows were rattling, like an express train. Spray was whipping the panes like a hail-storm, for the sou'-wester was blowing great guns, and the leaden sea and leaden sky were indistinguishable.

An officer was knocking at the door.

"Come in!" said the Major, when at last he heard him.

It was Second-Lieutenant Gray. "I came to know if I might go ashore and stay over Christmas, sir? Inglis will do my duty to-morrow, so I shan't be wanted till nine-thirty on Saturday."

"Well, you are a peculiar young man!" said the Major. "You've been here more than a month, and only been ashore two or three times at the outside. What on earth made you choose a day like this—the very worst I've known since I came to Round Table?"

"The same as before, sir—I have somebody down from town to see me."

"Can't you wait till to-morrow?"

"I don't want to, sir."

"It won't be particularly safe."

"I don't mind that, sir. I am quite prepared to take any risk there is, but I don't think there is any, except, perhaps, at the slip."

"I'm sure the skipper will think it too risky," said the Major. "He often does when it seems quite safe to me."

Gray smiled, but preserved silence; he knew how much the skipper's timidity was worth to him when some of the choice spirits among the officers were ashore. As a man who had done a deal of yachting, he knew that the skipper need never have been frightened for his tug, but should

have been a great deal more frightened than he was sometimes about letting men put off from the steamer when she came to the point where she anchored. The slip might have been safe in almost any weather for a properly-manned naval cutter with a rudder and a coxswain; but with promiscuous boats, manned by Tommies, even when they had a man steering, which was seldom, there was considerable risk in landing, and still more in going off, when they took flying jumps from the slip into a boat which was already rather overloaded.

In bad weather, if he was not on duty or asleep after his watch, Gray generally went down to superintend the men getting off, and to prevent accidents. He was so careful that he was almost suspected of having too great a respect for the sea.

The Major gave his permission. "What address will find you if you have to be recalled?" he asked.

"The *King Arthur Hotel*, sir," replied Gray. He expected to be staying at the Club, but he knew that he would be in and out of the *King Arthur* a good deal, and could tell the porter to take a telephone message.

The boat was due at one, and long before twelve Gray was ready to go ashore, and gazing out of the Mess-room windows, which looked across the bay to Westernport, to see if he could discover any signs of the tug coming round the spit at the mouth of the river, on which the town stood. From time to time he opened one of the windows for a minute, to train his glasses on the point, but the weather was too wild to leave it open.

There was not the faintest sign, and towards one o'clock he went back to the Major's office and said, "The boat's not coming, sir, and it's very important for me to get across. May I telephone to the yard for them to send over a tug for me?"

"I'm very sorry, Gray, but I've no authority to incur this expense."

"I don't want you to incur any expense, sir. I'm quite willing to pay for it myself—it's so important for me to get across!"

"They will make you pay through the nose."

"If they do, they must, sir, but I don't think they will: I've had dealings with them before, when I . . ." he did not

say what he was going to say, but changed to, "I suppose you didn't know, sir, that I hold a master-mariner's certificate?"

"No, I'm sure I didn't! Well, under those circumstances, if you think it's safe, I've no objection to your chartering a tug to come over for you."

"As soon as she can get up steam, sir?"

"Any time."

Gray went first to the telephone and arranged for them to send a tug as soon as possible—and another message to the *King Arthur Hotel*, and then went back to the Mess and said, "Is there anyone who wants to get ashore?" He had half a dozen eager answers.

"Well, as our old duffer of a skipper does not want to set any inconvenient precedents, there's a special boat coming over for us—a sea-going tug, as soon as they can send her."

"Have you seen the water on the slip, Gray?" asked his Captain—Roger Amory.

"No."

"Well, it's no earthly good the steamer lying off for an hour and a half yet—no small boat could live there now."

"Well, I shall go," said Gray, "because I've made an appointment." But the others, except Worboys, who went for devilment, cried off. There had been some very nasty shaves at that slip in weather not so bad as this.

"The slip's the dangerous place—there's no doubt of that," said Gray. "I'll just go and 'phone to the skipper to bring a proper boat and a picked crew to take us off."

"Pretty calm for a sub. who hasn't been in the Service four months!" said Jenkins, one of the men who had cried off.

"Oh, shut up, Jinks!" said the Captain. "Can't you see that the fellow understands what he's about? I thought it must be that when I saw him trying to knock some fear of the Lord into the Tommies over their antics with the boats!"

When Gray returned, he gobbled down a huge plateful of homely shepherd's pie, while he kept his eye on the window. He had chosen the seat which commanded the best view.

Presently he cried, "There she comes! It's the Stormcock, that does the lifeboat work—I know her rig!"

Most of the men who were at lunch put on their mackin-

toshes and hurried down to the slip to see them off. When they got there the tug had come about as near as she could venture, and had lowered a boat, rowed by four sailors, with an old salt at the helm. When the boat came within hail, he called out, " You'll have to be very careful, Mr. Gray, and look very slippery ! You must be ready to jump it as the wave carries her up, for the backwash will have her back before you can say crow ! "

" I know, Yabsley," he cried, and turning round to Worboys, said, " I'd better jump first—I'm accustomed to it," and he called to his servant, " Make that line I gave you fast to the handles of my suit-case—it might go into the water if the boat lurched."

It certainly looked rather terrifying, and the Mess stood watching with the deepest interest and a growing respect.

" Now then, Yabsley ! I'm ready ! " he cried, going as far down the slip as the sea would let him.

The coxswain waited for the right wave, and then said, " Let go, lads ! "

The boat leapt under them, and ran up almost to the top of the slip on the lee-side.

" Now, sir ! " called Yabsley, and Gray took his jump, landing clean, and his servant tossed the case in after him with such a fine insouciance, that he was almost dragged in after it, by holding on to the line too long.

The backwash carried the boat right out, and she had to wait for another suitable wave. When she swept up on the next big wave-crest, Worboys jumped. But he had not Gray's skill and experience, and, landing badly on a thwart greasy with seawater, he lost his footing and fell. It was touch and go whether he fell overboard or not, but two of the men had let go their oars, which were lashed, and were on the watch to help him, and they caught him safely in their strong arms, and stood him on the bottom of the boat till the backwash had carried it out to a steadier place, and it was possible for him to scramble aft to where Gray was sitting.

One or two subs. stayed a few minutes to watch the tug pitching. It had a curious sort of fascination for them. The others went back to the Mess to go to sleep, or play auction-bridge, or read the papers or write letters—in fact, to get through an afternoon, which they had expected to

spend ashore, in a poky little mess, which had not even a billiard-table.

The tug, though she kept burying her nose in green seas, shook them off merrily, and was soon at the quay of the outer basin of the Government dock, where troops and stores were shipped. The quay was roofed over all round the basin, except for a strip a few yards wide round the water. Under this roof, to take shelter from the violent driving rain-storm, was the figure of a woman, which made Gray's heart leap with joy.

It was a straight young figure, though its grace was buried in costly furs, and Worboys thought that the face was the most beautiful he had ever seen. He had certainly never seen any woman's mouth so lovely when it smiled, or such glorious eyes.

When Gray had stopped a minute to ask the skipper to send the bill to him at the Island, and to give Yabsley some money to divide with the boat's crew, he gave his suit-case to one of them, and flew up the steps.

She hurried forward and held out her hand. But her lips did not utter a sound. She smiled all she had to say.

Worboys stood a few yards off, a sturdy-looking boy in his fleecy pink cocksparrow "British Warm" overcoat, much perturbed in his mind as to whether he ought to hurry off, or wait for Gray till he had done speaking to his friend.

When Gray had got over his spasm of excitement, he perceived him, and said, "Oh, Mirry, I want to present Mr. Worboys, who is in my company—Mr. Worboys, Miss Douglas."

Mirabel, gave him her hand and smiled her welcome, and then turned back to Gray. "Well, Jack, what leave have you got?"

Jack! That was enough for Worboys. He hastily said good-bye and fled from the fiancés, as he supposed they were.

"Over Christmas—to be exact, I have to go back by the 9 a.m. duty-boat on Saturday."

"Where are you going to stay, Jack?" she asked. She called him Jack, his real name, instead of the name by which he was always known in town, because they had settled between them before they said good-bye at her house, when he went to Woolwich, that she was never to

use the name Oliver in her letters, or before any of his Army friends, because in the Army he did not wish to be identified with the proprietor of the *Babylon Theatre*. It was having to give his proper name, John, when he was attesting, which put the idea into his head that it might be possible to keep his identity undisclosed.

So far he had been successful.

"Where am I going to stay?" he said. "Well, I shall take a room at the Club—it's only just round the corner, and it's the general place for our chaps to stay when they are ashore, because it's so much cheaper than a hotel. I always like to do what the others do."

"Of course, you'll take your meals with me at the hotel?"

"What do you think?"

At this point the man who had carried the suit-case ashore came back to say that he had put it in a taxi.

Gray thanked the man and turned to Mirabel. "Now, let me drive you to the *King Arthur*!"

She smiled her thanks.

The man led the way to the taxi, and received his tip, and in not much over a minute they were at the hotel.

While he was seeing Mirabel into the hotel, he left the suit-case with the porter; he could easily get the page to carry it round to the Club when he was ready to go there.

Then he rejoined Mirabel. "Where shall we sit?" he asked.

"In my sitting-room—I've got a suite."

The *King Arthur*, in spite of its absurd exterior, supposed to represent an Arthurian palace, had charming suites, commanding a view of the bay.

When the lift had taken them up to the third floor, which she had chosen for the sake of the view, she led the way to her suite.

"And now, Mirry," he said, when they had seated themselves—she in the bow of the window, where she could look out on the great seas rolling in past the Island, and he farther back in the room, where his eyes could dwell on the lovely shape of her head, silhouetted against the light, "let me hear to what I owe this, the greatest windfall I ever had in my life!"

"To going to the front, of course. Directly I got your letter saying that you were ordered to the front on New

Year's Day, I determined to come down and spend Christmas with you. I got Old Mac to let my understudy take my part to-night."

"He must love you dearly," said Gray grimly. "He keeps a very tight hand on the sick list."

"Oh, he does! But for one thing, he knows that I never 'try on,' as he calls it!"

"Well, Mirry, you can't tell how enchanted I am!"

"I wanted to see you, too."

"Did you really?"

She answered with the affection in her eyes.

"I didn't think you cared for me enough."

"You must not think because I don't feel able to live with you that I have not appreciated the generosity and chivalry and devotion which you have showered on me! I have given you full credit for all these, and I like you as much as one can like another as a friend, but you wanted something that I could not give, so I have never been able to show you what friends we were."

"It is balm and manna to my soul to hear this!"

"I don't suppose that I should ever have told you this if you had not got your orders. But when it is war, and your friend is off to the trenches, from which, unless he is wounded or invalided home, under the most favourable circumstances he has little hope of returning till the war is over, one has to confess the truth or else for ever after remain silent. I felt that I must come down here, and make this confession to you."

"It was just ripping of you, Mirry!"

"So I wrote to tell you that I was coming, and not wishing to go to the *Bungalow* where they know that I am your wife, took rooms at the *King Arthur*. I drove straight to Paddington from the theatre, when the performance was over last night."

"Did Paula know that you were coming?"

"Heaven forfend! She'd think that I was going to elope with you at the least, if she knew that I was coming to Westernport! For of course she knows all about your being here, and would be bound to put two and two together."

"Where did she think you were going?"

"To stay with Lord Douglas, the 'elderly relative' whom she imagines to have bought and furnished my house for me."

" But what about your letters ? "

" I told her to do nothing about them, as I should only be away for a short time. I knew I should not be getting any letters from you, the only ones which mattered."

" What time did you get down here ? " he asked.

" Just before I telephoned to you."

" And how long has Old Mac given you ? "

" Only till Saturday morning. We have a matinee in the afternoon."

" That would mean your going up on Christmas night, and I've got leave till the following morning. That'll never do. Besides you won't get any good from the change unless you have three or four days in between the two long railway journeys. I'll wire to him : ' Miss Douglas will not be back from the country till Tuesday's performance ; she has my permission.' "

" How lovely ! Can you be over here all the time ? "

" No, I shall have to go back by the 9 a.m. duty-boat on Saturday morning, and I shan't get any more leave, because I have to go and lie down till twelve when I come off duty on Sunday morning, and I'm on duty again from lunch to dinner."

" Westernport will be rather dull without you."

" Tell me that you think so really ! "

" Well, do you imagine that I should have come all this way if I had not thought so ? "

" My dear, I never dared to contemplate such a thing ! "

They looked at each other in silence for a little. Then she said, " I was terribly afraid that I should have to do without you to-day, when I saw what a sea there was on ! I told the porter that I was expecting a friend over from the Island, and asked him what time the officers generally got over. He told me that he was sure that the duty-boat would not put out on such a day."

" She didn't. I had to charter a tug."

" Oh, Oliver . . . "

" Jack ! "

" Oh, Jack, it was just like your extravagance to hire a whole steamer rather than break your word to a woman ! And it needed some pluck, too, to come over in such a sea ! "

" Only at the landing-place on the Island. The rest was child's play."

" Well, it didn't seem like child's play to me. I thought it looked terribly rough ! "

He shook his head. " A bit wet, that's all—in a sea-going tug."

" There, now I know what a risky passage it was ! "

" It wasn't, really."

But she was not to be convinced.

Tea-time came. It was bliss for the lover, who had been longing for Mirabel as a wife all these weeks, to have tea in her rooms with her. He had the intuition not to besiege her with attentions. He had his reward when she said after tea : " It isn't raining much. Would you like to take me for a walk round some of our old landmarks, before it gets too dark, Jack ? I suppose they 'dowsse the glims' at night here."

" Not very badly—we're too far from Zeps."

" Then we can stay out for a bit after lamps are lighted," she said, taking his arm confidentially when they reached the palm-garden in the shallow land-bay between the hills which ran down to a bluff over the sea-road here.

Gray would barely allow himself to recognize the change in Mirabel's demeanour ; it was too good to be true. But he told himself that it sprang from a sort of pity—pity hardly to be distinguished from the feeling which every nice woman has for the wounded. He was wounded, wounded in the spirit, by her.

But the hand on his arm was a very human one. And he, of all men, knew a woman's human touch. For in the days when he was using his power at the theatre to demand the favours of the beautiful women in his employ, the women who were selling themselves to him for promotion, usually fell in love with him as they grew to know the charm of his nature. He had received even more of what they called " the glad eye " from the women of his theatre since Mirabel had become his leading lady, and his chief object in life had been to win a restitution of conjugal relations, for now no woman had to seek to avoid his attentions ; though some felt under the necessity of attracting them.

That Mirabel, charmingly as she behaved to him in public, was on the main question adamantine to him, was no new feature in theatrical life. Heartlessness is part of the armoury of a leading lady. At Bolingbroke House, though

there was no change in her resolution, she had let him enjoy a very pleasant friendship, when she found that he could keep off the tabooed subject. The necessity of maintaining this restriction was foreign to Mirabel's nature, which was to be sunny to everyone with whom she was brought in contact. That sunniness had even tempered the ill-feeling with which she was regarded by the women who had expected to get the place which she occupied.

In that amphitheatre between the hills, favoured by the soft Cornish climate, they had reproduced with the hardy dracaena palms the famous palm-avenue in front of the gaming rooms at Monte Carlo. A feeling of home and content came over Mirabel, for she and her father had generally gone for the coldest months in the year to Monaco. Her father hated Monte Carlo itself; "At Monte Carlo the whole population are waiters," he said.

It was strange that her mind should have harped on her life in the South, where her family were more or less exiles with a narrow horizon, when now, at the age of only twenty-three, she was rich and famous and popular, and had realized most of her ambitions. But do what she might, her heart was in the South, and the sight of the palms and the sea gave her the light-heartedness of the old days, when she kept the Gaetani and Orsini princelings at bay with her laughing wit, before she had made the marriage which robbed her of her dreams.

"Jack dear," she said to him, hanging on his arm, "none of them know it at the theatre, but I could not let you go to the wars without coming to say good-bye to you. I should never have forgiven myself if I had not come, and anything had happened to you! You have been so good to me. And now that I have come, nothing will happen to you: I am going to be your mascot."

As she said these words, which came to him as a thunderbolt, a flood of wild emotions and hopes surged through him. Was his beautiful and adored Mirabel, who had changed the whole current of his life, going to relent and give him some hope at last?

"You are a darling, Mirry!" he said, "though I suppose you will turn to an icicle again if I call you one!"

"No, you can call me what you like to-night! I am in the mood to be made a lot of." The soldier who would let

no weather keep him from crossing the stormy seas to his love had obliterated the manager of the theatre.

As she said these words, they were leaning on the railing of the verandah of the wind-shelter, which looked seawards. The rain had ceased and the clouds were scudding away; their eyes dwelt now on the moon-tipped breakers on the bay, now on the Oriental outlines of the *Bungalow*, down by the sea, where they had spent their honeymoon.

He laid his arm round her waist. She did not seek to withdraw it. The Admiralty had ordered the lights in the Westernport wind-shelters to be extinguished, and the lamps of the palm-walk did not reach to where they stood, gazing out to sea.

"Murry," he said in a low voice, and she turned her face to his. Frank lips met his half-way, and she let his arm remain round her waist as they walked down the dark, zig-zag paths which led to the sea-road.

There the sea was still flinging its wild spray over the seawall, but no longer reaching to the causeway on the inner side of the road.

"Isn't it lovely?" said Mirabel.

"Yes," said Gray. She meant the sea, and he meant the walk, of which the sea had nearly robbed him.

They rambled round the sea-road back to the town, and when they got into the streets again, she said: "Shall we go back to the hotel now? My feet are rather tired. I should like to get my boots off."

"And I must telephone to the Club for a room."

When he had telephoned they took the lift, and went up to her suite. Mirabel sank into the softest arm-chair with a tired sigh.

"Shall I unlace your boots for you, Murry?" he asked.

"Do you mind? It would be such a relief."

"Of course I don't."

She surrendered her slender feet into his affectionate hands

"Now tell me about your life, Jack," she said.

"Oh, there isn't much to tell! I'm in the fort over on that Island at the mouth of the bay, and I have only left it twice before this—once to see my lawyers and once on a Sunday, to see Old Mac. I'm trying dreadfully hard to learn my new business, and I can tell you that it's jolly difficult for anybody to whom it's all so totally new!"

"What sort of things, Jack?"

"Well, how should you feel if the Sergeant said to you: 'A high barometer necessitates a minus correction, and a low barometer necessitates a plus correction,' or expected you to remember that the smallest screw in the smallest gun you handled is called a screw-set-screw-securing-plate-locking-bracket-containing-catch-retaining-lever-breach-mechanism-open, when the whole thing is under a quarter of an inch long?"

"What do you ask for when you want one?"

"Well, it's such a standard joke that everybody knows."

"I should think I was going mad! But why are you taught by a Sergeant? Doesn't your commanding officer——"

"The Major?"

"Yes, the Major—doesn't he do anything?"

"It isn't his job, which is lucky, because it's a very long time since he learnt it all."

"What sort of a man is he?"

"Oh, a dear man, with a jolly laugh. He has a round, clean-shaven face and is as bald as an egg—the kind of man we should have for the elderly mug, the deceived father, and that sort of thing in musical comedy. He's a squire with a fine estate, I believe, who felt it incumbent on him, as an Englishman, to offer his services as soon as the war began, but whom it would be criminal to send anywhere where he had to dispose of men's lives in a sudden crisis."

"Is that Sergeant the only one who teaches you youngsters your business?"

"Well, the other officers do their bit in explaining, and there's a Sergeant-major-instructor from the School of Gunnery, who comes over every day. He's the only one who, as young Avondale would say, gets on his hind-legs and lectures."

At the mention of Archie's name a cold blast seemed to pass through the room. But she gave herself a little mental shake, and brightened up again.

He noticed the chill, and came to the conclusion that she must have quarrelled with Archie about something.

"And are you allowed to fire one of those big guns, or give the orders which make it fired, or whatever you do?"

"No, I haven't got so far as that yet. I only watch the other officers doing it, with respectful awe."

"Oh, Jack, fancy you such very small beer, when you have enough people for a regiment in your own employ, and as much authority over them as a commander-in-chief!"

"I'm a very ordinary person nowadays, Mirry!"

"Except to me, Jack," she protested gratefully. "By the bye, what's the time?"

"Nearly seven."

"I thought it must be—I'm so dreadfully hungry. Do you know what time you make me dine at home, you stern task-master?"

"Six, I suppose?"

"Half-past five! So are you surprised at my being hungry when my dinner's already almost an hour and a half behind time?"

"Dinner at half-past five! Oh, my lord!" he said. "And do I make a hundred people eat the finest meal of the day six nights out of seven at that unearthly hour? I shall join that reform league for having theatres at half-past five, so as to get the piece over before dinner. I believe that most people honestly would like it better; they could dine in peace then."

"Well, run away and play at the Club for half-an-hour, while I dress, and the waiter lays the table. I concluded that you would rather dine in my rooms."

Gray tried to conceal his surprise by pointing out, while he expressed his delight, the advisability of what she was doing, because the dining-room might contain people who recognized them both.

She was ready and waiting for him when he returned, for he had taken the opportunity of going to one of Westernport's winter florists and buying her a great bunch of scarlet roses.

She was wearing the most becoming evening-dress in which he had ever seen her, a severely-cut black, that accentuated her dazzling beauty. The waiter could not help staring. But she was accustomed to receiving the fire of eyes without noticing it. She picked out one glorious blossom and pinned it at her breast.

It was odd to find Gray not changed for dinner; he explained that in time of war officers do not wear mufti or mess-uniforms.

"What a charming frock, Mirry!" he said, drinking in her beauty as he looked at it. "How nice of you to wear the frock I liked so much!" he said, when the waiter left the room to bring in the soup.

She smiled gratefully at his recognition of it. "I found the champagne which you drink on the wine-card," she said, "so I had a bottle put on the ice."

"You shouldn't have ordered champagne for me, Mirry! To start with, it's only a drink for the wounded in war-time."

"I felt that a glass would be good for me, as I was so tired."

He had not expected her to be so tired. She always stood the double performance on Saturdays remarkably well, he thought. But he hated railway journeys himself.

She had ordered them to serve the ordinary *table-d'hôte* dinner, as she did not wish to attract attention, and did not wish to take too much time over it.

While the waiter was clearing, she said: "You can smoke, if you like. I did not order any cigarettes, because I could not picture you smoking any but your own."

"On the contrary, I smoke everything with everybody at the Mess—generally threepenny packets of Goldflakes, and I drink draught beer."

"Oh, my poor Jack!"

"There's no poor about it! I find that I like the simple life—this form of it. I don't think I'll smoke till I go back to the Club, Mirry, thanks, as you don't smoke."

"That's very considerate of you."

Mirabel had told the waiter not to bring the coffee till he had cleared away the dinner. When he left them, she said: "Bring up that little table to the sofa, in front of the fire, Jack. It will be cosier."

She surprised him by recapitulating all that he had done to advance her in her career, all the great pieces of consideration which he had shown her—innumerable recognitions of his generosity.

"There, you see," she said, "what you have done for me has not been lost on me, though I have been able to give you such a poor return for it. Some day, perhaps, my feelings about our marriage may change, and I shall accede to your wishes. But I do not feel that I can say yes yet, though to-night I feel like clay in the hands of the potter. That is affection for a dear, dear friend, who is going out to face the

enemy ; it is emotional ; it is not the spontaneous surrender of individuality which enables a woman to contemplate being a man's shadow for the rest of her existence. Knowing your past, Jack, I don't feel as if I could give up my life to you. I fully believe that you are a reformed character, but you have so many ghosts in your life—horrible, odious ghosts, of beautiful bacchanals without an ounce of brains, like some of the women I have to act with now, women whose inane extravagances and vulgar idiocies you had to pander to if you wanted to have their affections ! ”

“ I never cared for any of them like you, Mirry.”

“ I'm sure you didn't, or you couldn't have changed your life so completely for one who could give you so little in return. But the fact remains that the marriage you gave me was not a book with clean pages for me to write my life on, but at best like one of the *palimpsests* in our Ambrosian Library—a manuscript written on parchment, from which other writings have been removed by pumice-stone.”

“ Yes, I suppose my heart is one of those *palimpsests*, though I have never heard of them before. But every bit of the old writing has disappeared. Oh, I say, Mirry . . . ”

“ What ? ”

“ You might compare it to a second-hand book, instead of one of those things. Try and think of me as a treasure you have picked up at a bargain counter ! ”

“ That isn't a bad idea, Jack ! If the book is a valuable one, I don't think of microbes. And if you establish your worth, perhaps I shan't think of the . . . microbes of musical comedy ! ”

“ It won't be for want of trying, if I don't.”

“ And while I am here, I'm not going to remember anything but your goodness and the debt I owe you. I want you to carry to France with you a lively sense of the gratitude of a woman who regards you as her best and dearest friend, and who is about to give you a proof of it. Since you are off to fight for our country, when the war is over I will try to do what you ask when you return.”

She leaned towards him on the sofa, on which they had been taking their coffee, and kissed him with the natural, unashamed affection which a wife gives to her husband, the gift of all others for which he asked the gods.

CHAPTER XXXV

HOW MIRABEL BECAME GRAY'S FIANCEE

THEY had breakfast in the coffee-room. Gray supposed that if there were any officers staying in the hotel, they would not be down at nine o'clock when they were on leave, and he and Mirabel were having breakfast early so as to get a country walk before lunch.

But if there were no officers there, the mischief could just as effectually be done by the very pleasant-looking old lady, with a youthful and smartly-dressed figure and hair whose gold was only flecked with silver.

"Good morning, Mr. Gray!" she called out cheerily, as he came in from the Club a few minutes before Mirabel came down.

"Oh, good morning, Mrs. Hyslop," he replied cordially, though without feeling cheered.

But his experience stood him in good stead, and when Mirabel made her appearance, he said to her: "That's my Major's wife—may I tell her that you are my fiancée?"

"Does she—does anybody here know that you are Oliver Gray, Junior?"

He shook his head.

"Then I suppose that it would be the best thing to do, in case . . ."

He thought that he had better take the bull by the horns before Mrs. Hyslop began to do any wondering. He had found her a very nice old lady, in her pretty frequent visits to the fort; but a Major's wife who is very nice to a good-looking subaltern of her husband's, while he is dancing attendance on her at the Mess, may lift her eyebrows when she finds him having a *tête-à-tête* breakfast with a beautiful young woman, who is staying by herself at a hotel. So he walked over to her table, and said: "Mrs. Hyslop, may I introduce my fiancée to you after breakfast?"

Mrs. Hyslop smiled two smiles, one outwardly, to accompany a gracious assent, the other inwardly, in amused wonder at whether she really was his fiancée. In the part of Wiltshire

in which Major Hyslop had his estate they called a spade everything except a spade, and spades were very common. Looking at Mirabel with her shrewd old eyes, she was not in favour of the spade theory ; but if it was so, she was prepared to be broad-minded, because Gray had been clever enough to carry it off and include her in the party.

She was not, however, wanting in curiosity, and if the girl really was his fiancée, she was ready to be interested in her family. She looked as if she had a family.

"I'll come over and say how-do-you-do now," she said.
"Don't trouble her to get up."

But Mirabel was on her feet before they got to her.

"Mirabel, I want to present you to Mrs. Hyslop. Mrs. Hyslop, may I introduce Miss Douglas ? "

As she had done her breakfast, they pressed her to sit down with them. Her instinct told her that she would be *de trop*. She was *de trop*, as far as their enjoyment went, but without any signalling between each other, the inspiration came to both of them that it might be a useful thing, if any other military people came in who knew Gray, for them to be basking in the company of his Major's wife.

They were so obviously sincere in their invitation that she did sit down, and sitting there, her curiosity got the better of her. Her husband being a squire of ancient lineage, she had pedigrees on the brain.

"What is your branch of the Douglas family, Miss Douglas ? " she asked. She could have rattled off all the Douglas peerages without pausing to memorize them.

"I belong to Lord Douglas's family—I am a sort of cousin." She said it purposely with the air of a very distant Scotch cousin ; she wanted to convey the idea to Mrs. Hyslop that she was descended from some remote Earl of Douglas, but that the connection was so faint that it would not be recorded except in her family pedigree, if that happened to be in writing.

"Lord Douglas is a very fine man," said Mrs. Hyslop. "I wish he was taking his proper place in governing the country, or leading our armies." His letters to the *Morning Post*, breathing "the winter of our discontent," made much more impression on her than reports of his speeches would have made, if he had been in the habit of attending the House of Lords.

Seeing that Mirabel made no response, she was sure that it was a very distant Scots cousinship. Still, the girl was a lady, and most charming. So when she had elicited from her the fact that her visit was to last till Monday, though her fiancé's leave expired at 9 a.m. on Saturday, she pressed her to accompany her to the Island by the next day's afternoon duty-boat. And then, knowing the value of a *tête-à-tête* perfectly well, she left them.

It was the most ideal Christmas Day that Gray had ever had. To begin by seeing Mirabel at breakfast, to have her opposite him, pouring out his tea, just being together as if they were an ordinary husband and wife, was a brilliant start. The walk out to a village a few miles along the shore, where the churchyard had a cross going back to the times of the ancient Britons, and hydrangea bushes, as large as rhododendrons, still in flower, and the chinks between the stones of the church were as full of little ferns as they were of mortar, enchanted Mirabel. It was almost Italy.

They came back with a monstrous appetite for lunch. She had ordered the best lunch the hotel could achieve to be served in her suite.

Mrs. Hyslop looked in vain for them in the afternoon, and concluded that they were lunching at a distant inn.

The afternoon passed as an afternoon with a fiancé back from the front might have done. And so did the evening, after a really wonderful Christmas dinner, still *tête-à-tête*.

"Well, Mirry," said Gray, when the waiter had cleared the table and given them their coffee, "this has been one of the happiest days of my life!"

"I'm afraid that I haven't done much—not as much as I should have liked—for your entertainment."

"I don't want to be entertaincd. I simply want to look at you."

"Perhaps it's a good thing that I'm accustomed to being looked at, or I might be embarrassed."

"Don't let's fence," he said. "It's the kindest thing you've ever done in your life, to come down here and say good-bye! It bucks me up—I can't tell you how much! I can go to France with a light heart now, now that I may 'call myself your fiancé.'"

"You only got that out of me by a trick."

"By a trick, Mirry?" he said disappointedly.

" Well, at any rate, by a lucky accident ! But though I'm not really your fiancée, I'll behave as if I was."

" How ? "

" Well, I'll let you see something of my writing every day, for instance. It shall be a letter if I can manage it, and if I can't, I'll write the direction on a newspaper."

" Oh, I shall just love that ! You can't think what it will mean to me."

" I'm afraid that you'll be very disappointed with the letters ; they won't be love-letters—I couldn't write a romantic letter to save my life ! And I don't know what I shall put into them, unless . . . "

" Unless what ? "

" Unless you'll let me write you a report of the theatre every day—how things are going on, if there's anything you ought to know."

" Well, of course, my dear girl, there's nothing I should like so much ! It would make me feel as if you really are going to be mine when the war is over, if you are keeping a friendly eye on my affairs—our affairs—all the time."

" I'll do that, Jack," she said decisively. " I shall enjoy writing if I have a sensible reason for it."

He thought she was insisting on this rather more than she need have, but knowing her, he knew that it would make him see the beloved handwriting every day, so he was thankful.

Since this was her good-bye visit, and he had to go back to the Island by the 9 a.m. duty-boat, she let him be as affectionate as he wished, and was properly reciprocative, though if no war had come to break the even current of their lives, the barrier between them would have been as rigid as ever. More marriages are made in war than in heaven.

After a while she shook off his lips, which had been softly pressing that wonderful black hair where the golden lights came into it, and laid her hand on his knee impulsively.

" Jack," she said, " how would you like Mr. Maccabaeus to bring me the accounts of the theatre every day while you are away, as he used to bring them to you while you were there ? Then I should have something realler still to write to you about."

" Well, of course, I should like it—for one thing, though I think Old Mac is as honest as the day, it could not do any harm for him to know that they were going to be inspected by

an independent person every day. It would lessen the chance of things getting out of hand."

"Well, what time will he bring them to me?"

"Just whenever you please—ring him up from your dressing-room and say what time suits you."

"Well, tell me a few things."

He was surprised at the number and character of the questions which she asked, but very agreeably surprised. He had not expected so much business acumen. And somehow, the more practical they were, the more the barrier between them seemed to be broken down.

Only one difficulty loomed up. Would she be able to retain her balance of mind if Old Mac had to consult her in a matter where the other women were concerned? He determined to trust her—a woman's jealousy was not likely to work more injustice than a man's favouritism. And as far as he could make out Mirabel had no feelings about the other women, so long as they did nothing outrageous before her. She belonged with a vengeance to the new school, which regards being engaged in a theatre exactly as if it were being engaged in an office, and leaves the one behind it just as completely as it would the other, when the closing hour comes.

"Well, I'll send Old Mac instructions to do it."

Then their conversation grew more personal, for these were their last hours together before he went to France. At nine o'clock in the morning he would have to be on board the duty-boat—ominous word.

CHAPTER XXXVI

HOW MIRABEL VISITED THE MESS

MIRABEL was not going to see Gray off from the quay. The morning after Christmas Day there was sure to be a crowd of officers, and neither of them wished to invite attention.

Her suggestion that he should breakfast with her in her sitting-room, and say good-bye to her there, found more favour in his eyes.

When he came into the hotel he had told the porter to have a taxi ready for him at ten minutes to nine, and his suit-case

in it, but he kept it so long that he would certainly have missed the steamer if the numbers returning from leave had not made it shockingly late.

Mirabel had promised to stay till the Monday, partly because Gray thought that the two extra days of sea-air would do her so much good, since she had almost lived in the open air in Italy, partly because he said that it would give him pleasure, for, though he could not see her again, there was nothing to prevent him talking to her over the telephone from the Fire-Control Post, where he would be on duty. The Fire-Control telephone was in a sort of glass cupboard, in case there was any telephoning to be done while talking was going on in the post, but nobody could remember ever having seen the cupboard-door shut ; military men are accustomed to telephoning under difficulties. Gray's idea was to leave the look-out to the sapper-corporal who was on duty with him, and spend most of the day shut in that glass-house telephoning to Mirabel. There was nothing to look out for—in those days : no Germans were considered likely to come so far west as Westernport.

But Mirabel was rather disturbed in her mind ; she was not sure how far she ought to encourage Gray to spend the day in telephoning to her. She had an idea that it would be more honourable to go back to London, and place him out of the reach of temptation.

So when Gray had gone, she went down to look at the "Bradshaw" which was hanging from the telephone in the hall ; there was a separate telephone in her suite, or that would have settled the question, since for lovers' dialogue, having one end of the line in the Fire-Control Post of a Battery, is a sufficient handicap, without having the other end by the porter's desk in the hall of the principal hotel.

While she was looking at it, Mrs. Hyslop came up to her. She was an impulsive woman ; it was no affectation in her when she said, "I'm so glad that you're not going away to-day —you're so pretty that I like looking at you !"

Mirabel tried to feel annoyed, but it was impossible. So she guarded herself with saying, "But I am going back !"

"No, don't ! Stay and cheer an old woman by having your meals with her."

It was difficult to resist this offer, when she had already made all her arrangements for returning on Monday, so she

said, "Thank you, Mrs. Hyslop, very much indeed. That offer of yours turns the scales—Mr. Gray wanted me to stay here till Monday, for the change of air, but I dreaded the loneliness of the meals."

"And you will see him again," said the Major's wife, "because, you remember, we arranged that I should carry you over to Round Table this afternoon."

"To where?" said Mirabel. "Oh, yes, the Island! I never can fit it with its ridiculous name! If they would only call it *The Round Table*, perhaps I might."

They went for a walk in the town in the morning, and had lunch together in the coffee-room, and a little before three, though the sea was very rough for so low a tide, went down and took the duty-boat to the Island. Mirabel had found odd quarters of an hour to telephone to Gray both before and after lunch, and informed him what was going to happen. He told her that so far as he was concerned it would be no good—that he was on duty all day, in the Fire-Control Post, and unable to quit it except when he was relieved for meals. But none the less, she fully expected to see him on the slip at the Island when the row-boat, to which they had been transferred from the steamer, landed them, not without difficulty.

"Don't be alarmed, my dear, I shall find him," said Mrs. Hyslop. "Ah, there's the Major—I'll tell him what I want!"

That was Mrs. Hyslop's view of fortresses. Her husband was in command of Round Table, and she was in command of him. He had been so accustomed to allowing her to run his estate for the last twenty years, in order that he might spend his time in slacking and sport, that he usually had no initiative when she was present.

"Ponsonby," she said, "I want to introduce you to Miss Douglas, young Gray's fiancée."

Mirabel felt inclined to jump into the sea. She was sure that Mrs. Hyslop would multiply her indiscretions the whole time that she was on the Island, and she wondered how she was going to escape some little bird carrying the news from the soldiers here to the soldiers in the front row of the stalls. However, there was nothing to do but to go through with it, and hope for the best, so she smiled on the Major, and said, "How do you do?"

The Major, who was a great admirer of the fair sex, though

he was not accomplished as a squire of dames, said he felt better—he meant, better for seeing her, but she was so unprepared for it that she missed the point. It did not signify. He always laughed at his own jokes. Both he and his wife felt that they were creating an event for the Island, which was not supposed to be visited by ladies, and they would hardly have been able to contain themselves, if they had known who Mirabel was in the theatrical world.

They took her into the Mess, and presented the officers who were there. The officers were very grateful for Mirabel's advent, because Mrs. Hyslop expected every officer who was off duty to dance attendance while she was on the Island, and Mirabel was the kind of woman upon whom soldiers like to wait.

Their expectations had also been inflamed by the reports of Peter Worboys. This was evidently the girl whom he had seen. Up to this his reports had been regarded as "fish" stories. Worboys was not on hand to identify her, because he had gone to his bedroom, and pretended that he was going to sleep, when he heard that the Major's wife was coming.

"You mustn't be shy of my introducing so many men to you," said Mrs. Hyslop kindly.

Mirabel smiled inwardly, when she thought of the four rows of stalls, and wondered how anybody could be shy after that.

Mrs. Hyslop suggested that they should see the Island first, and have tea when it was dark.

There was not much for a woman to see on the Island. But she was shown the Mess, and the guns, and the armouries, and the men's quarters, and the searchlight apparatus and, last, but not least, the Fire-Control Post.

Mirabel was distracted, because she was shown the Fire-Control Post last, and at each fresh point she had expected to see Gray. She did not know what a Fire-Control Post looked like, and was shy of asking if they had come to it, for an obvious reason. Gray had been aware of her presence from the moment they left the Mess, because the F. C. P. commanded a view of the rest of the Island, and the unusual flutter had drawn his attention when he looked landwards.

He was overjoyed when at last he heard the light tread of ladies' feet upon the stair. He was going to see Mirabel immediately, when he had not hoped to set eyes on her any more until he came back from France, whenever that might be.

Mrs. Hyslop, of course, went in first, and shook hands with

him. "I've brought someone to see you," she said, beckoning Mirabel in.

The corporal, looking discreetly through three-quarter-shut eyes, thought that the officers had all the luck, and wondered why the Major's wife should be showering such favours upon a Second-Lieutenant who, to his knowledge, had not been four months in the Service.

There was, of course, nothing to see in the Fire-Control Post except the telephone and a telescope, and a sort of ledger for the officer to make remarks in. But Mirabel felt in duty bound to take such a keen interest in it that Mrs. Hyslop suggested a return to tea.

Only the Major had accompanied them into the somewhat confined space, and she felt that though politeness confined the attentions of Gray to her, his thoughts were with Mirabel.

"He can come to tea with us, can't he?" she said to her husband, indicating Gray, of course.

"Not until he's relieved, I'm afraid," said the Major.
"How long is it before you're relieved, Gray?"

"Half an hour and three minutes, sir."

"Who's relieving you?"

"Worboys, sir."

"Worboys," said the Major, "is, I understand, in bed, resting for his next watch; it cannot be this relief-watch?"

Gray could not resist a smile. The Major's smile was broader; he, too, realized the method in Worboys' madness.

"Ponsonby," said his wife, "you don't take tea?"

"No," said the Major. "What time are you going back, dear?"

"Not till after dinner."

"No, I don't take tea," said the Major. "I'll stay here until Worboys comes."

"Oh, thank you, sir, so much!" said Gray. "It is good of you!"

"No, it isn't—I haven't had a look-out to-day." He knew that he would have to 'watch out' for his wife if he did not, and if she was going to stay for dinner, he would see plenty of her charming friend, Miss—er—he had forgotten Mirabel's name.

His wife and her charges went off to the Mess-room. There was an excellent "roll-up" for tea. The British officer likes his tea, with enough buttered-toast to need a cheese-cover,

and rumours had gone round the Island. Gray was naturally very popular, for he was unassuming, and the most generous man in the Island about taking other people's duty, because he did not care to go ashore. If the girl who had come with Mrs. Hyslop was really his fiancée, they wished to do him the compliment of turning up to the tea. And as she was so unusually elegant and well-dressed, and, according to Worboys' report, was just as pretty as she was smart, it was an occasion not to be missed on that dull old Island.

Tea went on with the greatest animation for an hour and a half at least, before the Major reappeared. Mirabel, to whom he made his way as straight as a bee going back to its hive, thought that he appeared a little put out. The junior officers thought that he appeared as if he had been "taking it out of" someone. Their opinion was confirmed when he apologized to Mirabel because a junior officer who should have relieved him had overslept himself by half an hour.

The whole Mess was roaring with laughter inside at the idea of the Major in the Fire-Control Post waiting for the faithless Worboys.

His absence, however, was all for the best in the best of possible worlds, because when he did appear, the Major had, of course, to be allowed to monopolize Mirabel, and she could not have stood more of his *facetiae* than she endured between six and the dressing-bell for eight o'clock dinner. One by one the officers felt the call of duty, leaving the Major and his wife and Mirabel and Gray.

Directly the Major appeared Gray had said a word to Mirabel about hoping that she would not have gone before he was relieved for dinner, an hour after the rest. He was guilty of allowing himself to be overheard by Mrs. Hyslop. As it was her habit to be rowed back in the Engineers' cutter when she stayed to Mess, time did not much signify to her. Having said a brief provisional good-bye, he saluted the Major, and said, "I'm going now, sir, to relieve Worboys."

"It's not necessary," said the Major. The dignity with which he said it showed how seriously he had been annoyed. "Lieutenant Worboys will remain on duty in the Fire-Control Post until midnight, and have his dinner taken to him there, for being asleep when he should have been on duty."

Gray felt that he would have to make large amends to

Worboys, though it was impossible for him to gainsay the Major now.

Mirabel, not knowing the impropriety of which she was being guilty, said: "I'm afraid you're doing this for me, Major."

And the Major, in a thoroughly deceitful way, protested that he was not doing it for her, but merely to punish a breach of duty, in such a half-hearted way that, as he hoped, she did not believe him.

Mirabel was enjoying herself hugely. Apparently no one recognized her, and she had been made the most of by a lot of manly, cheery, unpresuming young soldiers, so free from the taint of the stalls that they gave her an entirely different idea of the Army. But she did not deny to herself that her principal pleasure was in seeing how popular her husband was with his brother officers, and how distinctly he was the pick of the bunch. It put her in better conceit with the world.

Major Hyslop no longer had many tactical or strategical ideas of any value, but it was a distinct inspiration of his that, for "look-out" reasons, it would be wise to let the officers and the men make merry on different nights, and as the men would have been disappointed if they had not been allowed to have their merry-making on the right night, the officers had to wait till Boxing Day. The Mess was glad to have ladies to help it with its Tom Smith crackers and its champagne.

Gray, who had taken part in many Amphitryonic feasts, enjoyed this banquet, which would have appeared a picnic Christmas dinner to him in the days before the war, more than he had ever enjoyed any banquet in his life, for he was sitting next to his wife, who was on the Major's right, and the Major had so much to do as chairman, that he contrived to get a good deal of her attention, though she was naturally the centre of attraction and conversation for all that part of the table. She was excited, the whole thing being a novelty for her. It gave her a colour which made her look radiantly lovely.

The officers could not decide exactly what she was, because her conversation lacked the little pieces of "swank" with which most girls, circumstanced as she was that night, let hints drop about their cars or their horses, or the smart people in their neighbourhoods. But they liked her all the

better for it ; it is charming to find a lovely woman unsophisticated.

Suddenly, when the merriment was at its height, Gray looked at the watch upon his wrist, and said : " My goodness ! It's half-past nine ! What time did Mrs. Hyslop order the boat, Mirry ? "

" She doesn't order it," said Chaster, the R.E. Captain, who was sitting near them as Gray's chief friend ; " the boat's on the slip, and my men just stand by till she's ready."

The moment that looking at watches put the idea of the returning voyage into people's heads, everyone noticed the boisterousness of the night. The Major looked worried ; Gray, who had no fears himself, was concerned about Mirabel's going back in an open boat in the dark, if the crossing was bad.

He rose and whispered to the Major. " Shall I go out, sir, and see if the men have made proper preparations ? " It was very self-sacrificing of him to ask, because every minute which his wife stayed on the Island was meat and drink to him.

" Yes, do ; there's a good chap," said the Major, who often lapsed into civilian civilities.

Gray hastily slipped into his cap and overcoat, which he had left hanging on the pegs behind the screen in the Mess-room, so that he might have them handy if the ladies left in a hurry, and went out.

He did not return for about ten minutes, and then he went up to the Major with a serious face. " I don't think you know what a heavy sea there is on, sir. I shouldn't like to cross in an open boat ; but, of course, if the ladies go, I'm going. I don't think there's anyone on the Island fit to steer her except me."

" And why should you know better than the rest ? " asked the Major, a smile of amusement stealing into his worried face ; he thought it was a piece of subaltern's swank.

" I told you, sir, that I hold a master-mariner's certificate, and I know the water."

" Of course you did ! " said the Major. " Then I think I'd better go and look at it myself."

The subalterns, who were far enough off, sniggered while the Major was calling for his cap and his cape.

Mirabel asked : " Is it really too bad to go, Jack ? If it's not actually unsafe, I don't care how rough it is."

" I don't see how you're to embark," he answered. " It's worse than it was when I had to jump on Thursday afternoon, and a woman can't jump—you can only drop her in, as it were, and that's ugly work in the dark, with a sea like this."

" Well, I leave it to you, Jack. I have given you the right to decide for me."

" Oh, the Major'll decide, though he naturally will listen to his wife's wishes."

" Are you ready, Gray ? " said the Major.

" Yes, sir. Let me go ahead and see if the man with the lantern is there."

" Yes, I've just seen to that," said the R. E.

Preceded by the lantern, they went out of the fort gate and down a slippery causeway about fifty yards long, to the head of the slip, where a boat's crew of Sappers were standing by, with about a hundred men belonging to the garrison, who were ready to lend a hand in launching the boat. The crew were absolutely unconcerned ; the idea of danger did not seem to have struck them at all. They were splendid men, typical Sappers.

" Take care, sir ! " shouted Gray, as the wash of a big wave, coming right over the slip, soaked the Major up to his ankles. " The backwash is so dangerous, if you are not on the look-out."

" Thank you, Gray, thank you. I really don't think that it is a fit night for ladies to cross in an open boat."

" You may take my word for it, sir, that it isn't."

" The word of a master-mariner—eh, Gray ? "

" That's it, sir."

" Where's Captain Chaster ? "

" Here, sir," said the R.E.

" The boat will not go to-night."

" Very good, sir."

They returned to the Mess.

" I can't let you go, Miss Douglas," said the Major gallantly ; " you would ruin your pretty clothes."

" There are worse things than that, Major."

" Is there anything worse ? "

" Yes—risking the lives of brave men."

" You are right, Miss Douglas," he said, the change in his manners showing what good stuff he was made of.

" Are we really not going, Ponsonby ? " asked his wife.

" Absolutely impossible, my dear ! "

" Then what are you going to do with us ? "

" Have clean linen put on the beds of two of the officers who are on shore, and have fires lighted in the rooms. If you let them burn a couple of hours before you go to bed, they'll be pretty comfortable."

" What shall we do all that time ? " asked Mirabel.

" Well, the men have asked us to a concert which they are holding in the armoury," said Gray. " I daresay you'd enjoy it. The soloists, as a rule, ' can't sing for nuts,' but all the songs have choruses, and the men do the choruses very well."

" It depends on whether Mrs. Hyslop wants to go."

" I'm dying to. I've been trying to get to one of these sing-songs ever since my husband came here, but I'm always sent ashore before they begin. I'm told that the programmes aren't up to much—' It's a Different Girl Again,' ' A Little Grey Home in the West,' and that sort of thing."

It was decided to repair to the armoury in a body, since it was expected of the Major, who had to occupy the seat to the right of the non-com. in the chair. Seats to the right and left, more than sufficient to accommodate the officers and the ladies, were at once evacuated.

The men all crowded round the door, so as to get a good view of the officers and the ladies. They attach great importance to the officers' attendance at their sing-songs.

The whole thing appealed to Mirabel extraordinarily—the walk from the Mess to the armoury on that wild night ; the great searchlights sweeping the sea from the casemates into which they were permitted to peep ; the little knots of uniformed men scattered about outside the armoury ; the grim armoury itself, formed out of three of the bomb-proof casemates, in which the guns had been mounted in the old days of muzzle-loaders ; the decorations, for which all the signalling flags had been requisitioned during the hours of darkness ; and the crowd of sturdy, swarthy Tommies, in all degrees of uniform and deshabille, with whom the armoury was packed.

The first song, if it had been anything but " God Save the

King," would have been a horrid failure, for the pianist, an Army Service Corps Sergeant, could not successfully grapple with even that simple melody. When it was over, the chairman apologized. The real pianist was on shore; he was to have returned by the late afternoon duty-boat, which had not run. He called for volunteers, but none were forthcoming till at last Mrs. Hyslop, who was sitting between the chairman and Mirabel, told the chairman that her friend would not mind playing the accompaniments.

The chairman gave the announcement amid loud cheering, and conducted Mirabel to the piano. It was early in the war then, and "Tipperary" was the band-less music to which our men marched to their grim fights in France and Flanders, so while the performers, in a fit of stage-fright, were all trying to avoid singing first, she struck up "Tipperary" as a march, with a fine thumping touch, and when she came to the chorus-music, every man in the room joined in at the top of his voice.

"Tipperary" having been sung without a solo, the soloists came forward, most of them without much voice, but some with excellent humour. Being an accomplished pianist, she made the most of them, and the choruses were splendidly rousing and supported.

When all of the singers had sung once, and all of them been encored, the sergeant in the chair asked: "Won't the charming lady who is accompanying give us a song?"

"Of course I will," said Mirabel, "if my friends all round me wish me to—and if Lieutenant Gray will accompany me, so that I can face my audience."

"Hear, hear!" roared the delighted Tommies, and Gray jumped over the table and went to the piano. She said something to him, and with a smile and a blush gave them the famous waltz song from "The Merry Widow," which had made her fortune.

It was almost startling to hear that rich and delightful voice, which was the talk of London, filling those grim casemates in the old Georgian battery, which formed an armoury in state of war. Now that she was facing them, instead of busying herself with the piano, the whole audience was magnetized with her beauty, and when she had finished, the old casemates fairly shook with the applause.

In reply to the thunderous encores, she gave them "Land

of Hope and Glory," and made many a man feel a lump in his throat by the passion with which she sang it.

When the applause at length died down, she took Gray's place at the piano, and giving the solo herself, rolled out "Rule Britannia." Once more, as she made the audience quiver with the spirit which she called forth from their poor old piano, the whole assemblage thundered out the chorus, once more there was rapturous applause, and then, as twelve was striking, she called on them to take hands, and struck up the solo of "Auld Lang Syne."

The Scots in the garrison went wild with emotion at hearing it sung in pure Scots—her father in all his years of exile had never lost his Scottish speech. And long after the officers and their guests had passed back to the Mess, the men went on singing it in ever-widening circles, under the Christmas sky.

She at the piano had been unable to link hands, and the man there with whom she was faintest to link them, had to slip away as the first chorus ended, bidding her good night—his last good night—more briefly than King Henry of Navarre used to take his Mass, for he had to go and relieve the interned Worboys in the Fire-Control Post, and remain on duty until breakfast-time.

Gray had another of the bizarre experiences which the war had brought to him, for, instead of shielding his wife back to the Mess, pointing out the pitfalls of the steep and slippery stone paths and steps in the dark, with a lantern to her feet, he had to scramble up the wooden steps to the F.C.P., to relieve Worboys.

Being several minutes late, he was prepared for a storm from his excited and injured friend. Instead of which, the words which greeted him were, "Is she still here, and about?"

"Yes," said Gray, thinking that it was a trifle ingenuous of Worboys to display such a violent interest in his "fiancée."

"Then go and look after her till she goes to bed. Another hour or two will make no difference to me now—and she can't sit up all night!"

But Gray refused. Through no fault of his own, he had already had a glorious evening off at Worboys' expense, and if there was going to be any more fun now, he thought that Worboys ought to have it.

So while the gay sounds of the piano and Mirabel's voice were being wafted over the waters, the wind having suddenly dropped, and the windows been opened to let the smoke out for the ladies—in those days no one ever thought of Zeppelins in the West—he was pacing up and down the lonely post, full of surging thoughts, and keeping an extra sharp look-out, in order to exorcize them. He longed to see the periscope of a submarine, or even an enemy squadron—Mirabel would be quite safe in the underground passage from the Mess to the batteries, which the Major said would have to be in the Officers' Mess if there was any fighting, since their present building was only a shell-trap.

But nothing came, so he walked up and down, going over the events of that wonderful day with Mirabel, who had dropped, as it were, from Heaven.

Though he had not seen her for five minutes alone since the morning, it was, in a way, the most wonderful day which he had ever enjoyed with her, for Mrs. Hyslop having introduced her in the character of his "fiancée," Mirabel had felt constrained to play the part, treating him with charming deference, and looking to him at every turn. She even kissed him when he bade her that hurried good night. When would she be saying good night to him again? he wondered.

No one quite caught the name he called her—Mirry; it was such an indistinct and uncommon name.

Gradually he ceased to attempt to exorcize his thoughts, and whenever he rested his eyes from watching, and let the corporal take his turn, his mind filled the narrow Fire-Control Post with pictures of the marvellous events of the day—marvellous events, which consisted only in a girl of twenty-three treating him as an accepted lover. It was all too wonderful.

Yet it was all kindly, generous play-acting. Mirabel felt hardly at all different towards him personally than she had felt ever since she was at the theatre. She was profoundly grateful for what he had done for her, but she was really just as unwilling as ever to live with him, when he had such a past. But he was going away to the front, to fight for his country, so she felt it her duty to send him forth rejoicing. Gratitude made it intolerable to her not to come and say good-bye, but for the rest her country was

her lover, not he. It was to Britain that she was giving herself.

But for his sake she played her part so well that the Herald Angels seemed to be singing round that lonely watch this Christmastide, though war was raging from the British Channel to the Yellow Sea.

Meanwhile, at the Mess, at the Major's special request, Mirabel was giving them a few more songs before she went to bed. She sang the best of her own songs from "Mary, Queen of Scots"—nobody had heard them, and she gave them the impression that she could not remember the name of the opera. She did it from sheer devilment, to see if she had been discovered. Perhaps no one would ever discover that the leading lady of the *Babylon*, accompanied by the managing proprietor, Oliver Gray, Junior, had sung at the Gunners' Boxing-Night concert at Round Table Island.

When Worboys made his appearance, there was a round of laughter.

"This is the naughty boy," said Mrs. Hyslop to Mirabel.

"I know him," said Mirabel, holding out her hand to him as she spoke, "Mr. Worboys and I met ashore; he came over on that pleasure-cruise with Mr. Gray. How do you do, Mr. Worboys?"

"Well, I needed a change badly. I find the air in the F.C.P. very relaxing."

As he came in he had ordered some supper, and a long Scotch and soda. The Mess-waiter came up to tell him that they were ready.

"They can wait," he said.

"No, hurry through and join us—we shan't be going to bed yet," said Mrs. Hyslop kindly.

Mirabel did not mind; she was already getting into the theatrical habit of regarding an evening as only beginning when the theatre was over. She was popular at the at-homes of intellectuals, to which the Beauties of musical comedy pay only angels' visits.

"How charmingly you sing, Miss Douglas!" said Mrs. Hyslop. "You would make your fortune on the stage!"

"Do you think so?" laughed Mirabel. "I wonder what 'my young man' would have to say to that?"

"Poor dear—I'd forgotten him! We must do something

to get him ashore to-morrow. You said he was on duty again to-morrow, didn't you ? "

" In the afternoon, yes, and as he does not come off to-night's duty till breakfast-time, and is compelled by regulations to lie down for so many hours after that, I'm afraid it doesn't leave much time for going ashore. But I shall see him at breakfast, I suppose—you're not going off before breakfast, Mrs. Hyslop, are you ? " she asked, with admirable make-believe.

" Perhaps we shan't get off for a week," said Mrs. Hyslop, shirking the point, " who knows ? This may be the beginning of a spell of bad weather ! Seriously, I'll tell the Major that something must be managed somehow."

" I'm sure you're conspiring to make me take Gray's duty again to-morrow afternoon ! " said the self-composed Worboys, coming across to them from the corner where he had been having his supper. The Major's wife liked him a great deal better than he liked her ; he was so very " fresh." That was why he had gone to bed in the afternoon.

" We weren't, I assure you ! " said Mirabel. " We didn't even mention your name."

" Very likely not," he said, " but you were trying to run in someone ! I know how ladies look when they're arranging a ' try on ' ! "

" Mr. Worboys ! " cried Mrs. Hyslop, though she was pleased inside.

" Well, anyhow, I came to offer to take Gray's duty. I don't want to go ashore on Sunday—I think Westernport's a rotten hole on Sunday ! And he's taken my duty ever so many times. Will you tell the Major, Mrs. Hyslop ? "

She understood that if she asked leave for Gray, and said that she had found a substitute for him, she would get it, whereas if Gray asked himself, the Major might point out that he was ashore from Thursday till Saturday—that he had, in fact, only returned to duty that morning.

" Yes, I'll see to it, Mr. Worboys. And we all appreciate your unselfishness, though you wrapped it up in a joke. It's awfully good-natured of you ! "

" I hope somebody'll do the same for me some day, when I find a Miss Douglas," said Worboys.

The Major, of course, fell in with the arrangement. He preferred it to falling out with his wife. On one point, however, he was obdurate, and that was that Gray should not leave the Island until he had gone to bed for the period laid down in the regulation for officers coming off night-duty.

Mrs. Hyslop made no objection. It suited her very well ; it took twenty years off her life to be a Major's wife, surrounded by young officers, again, and she was not in any hurry to go off the Island. Indeed, rumour said that the Major went about in terror of being reprimanded for having her on the Island so much, and that he had tried to expostulate with her.

"Very well, my dear," she said, when he put his foot down about Gray, "Miss Douglas and I will not mind waiting till he is ready."

Miss Douglas did not mind in the least. She played rope quoits with Worboys after breakfast, not because she liked it, but because it gave him the opportunity of monopolizing her, which she considered his due.

They went ashore by the half-past twelve duty-boat, and felt constrained to have lunch in the coffee-room with Mrs. Hyslop.

Mirabel was rather glad to do so, for Gray's getting this extra afternoon and evening with her was in the nature of an anti-climax. She had come down to spend Christmas with him, to show her gratitude, and bid him a proper good-bye. All through those two days which he had spent ashore with her she had braced herself up to be as affectionate as possible, to sweeten his memory of her, and save her from remorse when he had gone. She could not help being fond of him, but so far from wanting to live with him, her marriage with him caused her more regret than anything she had ever done in her life, for it prevented her marrying Lord Avondale, to whom she had given her whole heart.

Indeed, she had gone much further than she intended in letting Gray present her to Mrs. Hyslop as his fiancée.

He himself was astonished by it.

It was very difficult to spend another afternoon and evening at the same high pitch, but her knowledge of human nature came to her rescue. She reflected that, being a man, he would like nothing better than passive submission.

And her judgment was sound. He asked no more, and he was so unselfish and unpresuming that she found herself acquiescing not only without grudging, but with real affection. She could almost have forgiven his past, if she had not coveted her freedom.

He went back to Round Table by the 9 a.m. duty-boat on the following morning in ignorance of what a great actress his leading lady was.

CHAPTER XXXVII

ARCHIE'S SECOND INVASION OF MIRABEL

MIRABEL caught an early train back to town, and arrived there just in time to have a hurried dinner sent up from the restaurant to her dressing-room, and see her understudy play her part, as she had arranged not to appear again till the Tuesday.

While she was eating her dinner, there was a knock at the door, and her understudy came in, wearing her royal robes.

"I suppose I had better take these off as quickly as I can, and send them round to you, now that you've got back," said the girl, who looked horribly disappointed at missing the opportunity of playing the part again.

"Not at all," said Mirabel, "I'm not going to play. I couldn't play it, coming in with such a rush. I hurried in to see you play, and to see how the piece looks from the front of the house."

"Not going to play it!" the girl could hardly believe her ears. "Oh, Miss Douglas, how sweet of you to let me have another chance!"

"Run along, my dear, or you'll be late, and if you want to show your gratitude, don't let anyone know that I'm here."

Then she spoke down the tube to Old Mac, to know where she could have a seat.

He came along, much perturbed, to beg her to play.

"Didn't you get Mr. Gray's wire about my reporting to him?"

"Yes."

"Well, I want to see it from the front, so as to be able

to report to him from my own observation. Where can I have a seat?"

"In the stage-box, my dear, and let me entreat you to sit as far back as possible, and to keep your veil down. I should not like the audience to recognize you."

"Certainly."

But with all her precautions, one member of the audience did recognize her. The eyes of love told Archie who that veiled figure was, sitting back in the shadows of the big box. He always scanned the boxes. His battalion was still at the Belgravia Barracks, and his evenings being free, his patronage of the theatre had not diminished.

He left his stall and went round to the box. He was stopped by the attendant, placed there by Old Mac on purpose to prevent Mirabel being raided. The man would not even take a card, with a half-crown under it, to Mirabel.

"Well, take me to Old Mac."

"Yes, my Lord."

"Mac," said his Lordship.

"What's up?" was the laconic reply.

"I see that my cousin, Miss Douglas, is in the stage-box, and I want to go and speak to her."

"Now, look here, Lord Avondale—you were nearly cousins out of the theatre last time you tried this game. Can't you give it a bone?"

"You don't understand, Mac. We really are cousins—my mother went and put that right, and now we're all pals."

"Your mother!" said Old Mac, with withering irony, and the common familiarity of his type. "You don't often let her into your little games!"

"Shows that this one is all on the O.K.!" said the unabashed Archie.

"I don't know whether to believe you or not—you're so deep."

"Well, what sort of an idea do you think it would be if you went and asked her, while I stay with the chucker-out you've so thoughtfully stationed there?"

"Well, my idea is that she will be so angry that I positively won't go unless you promise to stay here till I come back."

"I'll do a smoke. Are those cigarettes of yours any good, Mac?"

"No, they're for the people who come in to waste my time—they never stay to finish them!"

"Then I'll smoke one of my own," he said, helping himself to the manager's chair.

Old Mac knocked at the door of the stage-box.

"Come in!" said Mirabel, thinking that it was the attendant. The public have a different knock.

"That fizzy young Avondale's trying to see you again! He made a dead set to come into the box. He's got a yarn that he's your cousin."

"He is my cousin, Mac—but for goodness' sake don't tell anybody, I hate my private affairs being known in the theatre."

"Well, shall I let him in?"

"I don't much want to listen to his chatter to-night. But he's a very nice boy, and I have no real reason for not seeing him, so I suppose you must!"

"So that's why she won't giddy-ox like the others!" said Old Mac to himself, "because she's a real tip-topper! Well, it would save me some trouble if the rest was, though it wouldn't be good for the business!"

"She'll see you," said Old Mac, adding, in his familiar way, "but she doesn't seem very anxious."

"Anxiety be damned!" said the Viscount, but he took the hint, for when he got inside the box, he greeted her very quietly. "How do you do, Mirabel? They told me at your place that you were out of town."

"I've just come back. I'm rather sorry for myself, Archie! You can sit with me, but I don't want to talk."

"Tell me just one thing; why isn't one of the Lizzies doing your part?"

"They're far too grand for that. But don't talk, Archie, I want to see how my little understudy does it."

"All right, Mirry," he said, but he felt that it was rather hard on him, as he had seen the play thirty or forty times, and took less interest in it than usual because Mirabel was not playing the lead. But he respected her wishes, because he loved her so much that he was willing to do anything she liked. And he reflected that it would make the other fellows wild if they recognized her. This comforted him a little.

The truth was that Mirabel was in no mood for badinage with Archie, when she had just, as it were, accepted her

husband. Had there been only one lover, and that one Lord Avondale, what a miserable woman she would have been at parting from him ! and what an eager, happy woman she would have been now ! She had parted from Gray with the regret a woman accords to a favoured cousin, rather than a lover. And she was in love with Archie, to whom she would not allow even a cousin's privileges. But she was trying hard to give Gray more love, and Archie less.

Just before the play finished she said, " Now, Archie, go back to your stall, please ! "

" But aren't you coming to supper with me, Mirry ? "

" Certainly not ! "

" Well, let me drive you home ? "

" I've got my own car, thank you."

" I may see you into your car, mayn't I ? "

" No, you know you may not ! How can I keep the others off if I am seen accepting these sort of attentions from such a notorious person as you ? You're allowed to come and see me at my home twice every week, and at your own home as well, and that ought to be enough for anyone."

" So it is, Mirry—it is really ! But a fellow can't walk out of his pretty cousin's box, and just do nothing, as if he was a discharged cab ! "

" It's a lovely short way of saying good-bye ! " said the often-harassed Mirabel. " But to show that my feelings have not experienced any change"—she said this with an air of insincerity, to conceal the truth—" I invite you to come to lunch with Paula and me to-morrow. What time can your country spare you ? "

" Oh, now that we're not allowed to shift out of uniform, I can be with you by half-past one."

" Very well, Archie—half-past one."

He did not go back to his stall. He did not want to see his friends ; but he hoped that they had noticed where he was sitting.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

RE-ENTER LORD DOUGLAS AS THE ELDERLY RELATIVE

In the morning, while Paula was ordering the dinner and, with especial care, the lunch, Mirabel was telephoning to Lord Douglas that she would be with him in less than an hour at Richmond.

She walked to Hammersmith Broadway, and took a taxi. It would not help out her idea for her chauffeur to know where she was going.

She found Lord Douglas, as she had expected, in the pavilion, with a tremendous log-fire. He remembered how she felt the cold.

He met his pretty cousin with a fatherly kiss. When they had seated themselves in the deep, downy armchairs which stood on opposite sides of the blaze, he said, "Well, Mirry, what is it? I'm sure it's some scrape, or you would not have descended upon me so suddenly."

"Oh, it's nothing—it's only that I've been staying with you again, and that I thought you ought to know it, in case the family discusses it with you."

"Have you told them that you've been staying with me?"

"No," she said, "Paula has told herself. It is part of the stupendous work of fiction which she is composing about my life."

"What did you tell her, then?"

"Oh, that my elderly relative had insisted on my spending Christmas with him!"

"Don't think that I'm trying to be sarcastic, or making innuendoes, if I ask if it was the same elderly relative?"

"Not half so bad as that this time. I'll tell you frankly and fully what I've been doing."

His face instantly assumed the kindly seriousness which made her so instinctively apply to him in trouble.

"Well, you know how good Oliver Gray has been to me?"

"Yes, I think so."

"He not only gave me that splendid position, which everybody tells me, has made my fortune already, but, though he is awfully in love with me, he never says a word about his love to me, or presses his suit in any way. Unfortunately, you see, Jim, the idea of living with him as his wife is intolerable to me ; I simply couldn't love a husband who has had as many affairs with odious women as he has had ! "

"Is he such an awful man ? I shouldn't have thought so ! I have always thought him rather a decent chap ; he's a 'bird,' of course ! What young man, unless he was an angel, wouldn't be a 'bird' if he had the chances which Gray has had ? Because, mind you, Gray's a charming-looking chap, and with his money, and the power his theatre gives him over all those good-looking young women, he would have to be a St. Anthony to escape."

"But it's because he's a 'bird' that I hate the idea of being his wife ! I don't want to share my husband with all those memories ! Ever since I can remember, from the time that I was a mere child, living in our beautiful old Villa Visconti, with that lake and Monte Rosa, and those woods and those oleanders, and those fairy-tale castles on the hill-tops in the distance, my dream was to marry a fairy-prince as romantic as those surroundings. When I grew up and had to translate this idea into hard facts, I dreamed of a marriage with an ideal husband. I never much thought about the money side of it ; what I wanted to do was to share every hour of my life with a man whom I felt I could love, honour and obey from the bottom of my heart ! But how can you love, honour and obey a man who has loved and obeyed and been dishonoured by half the beauties of the *Babylon* ? "

"Well, if you ask me, I should say by taking as read all his life up to the moment when he met you and reformed, if he hasn't a thought for anything in the world except you now ! Do you know that phrase ?—'Take it as read'—it's the one we use at the committees of the various movements with which I am connected, to save ourselves being bored by listening to the minutes of a previous meeting. Don't you think, Mirry, that you might take Gray's 'minutes' as read ? "

"I wish to goodness I could, Jim ! But it isn't in me to

do it. I want a husband who hasn't got any 'minutes,' in that sense."

"I am sorry, because I think you're wrong."

"We're getting off the point, Jim! The point is that because I owe all this to Oliver, and because he adores me, and because he is going to the front on New Year's Day, I went and spent my Christmas at Westernport, a few miles from the fort where he is stationed, so that he could come over and see something of me whenever he was off duty, just as he used to come to see me on Sundays in London."

"Well, if that's all you did, I don't see anything very dreadful in it. He might, in fact, have sent for you, as you are his leading lady, and the success of his present piece is bound up with you."

Mirabel was constrained to be disingenuous, which she hated above all things. It was the thing which she hated most about Gray's singularly unselfish pursuit of her. She did not think it was prudent to tell her cousin how much time Gray had spent in the hotel: she thought that he might put a wrong construction on it, frankly as he trusted her.

"There isn't anything dreadful in what I did," she said, "there isn't anything that the purest and most decent-minded woman in the world might not have done. The point is, that Paula would not understand. She is a novelist, and she is unconsciously composing a novel about my life, and in novels, if you are given certain premises, certain results have to follow. If Paula knew that I had done this, you can't imagine what dreadful things she would think! So you'll have to help me, or prepare to read in your *Times* to-morrow of the body of a well-known actress being found in the Thames at Richmond! I shall go straight down and do it, Jim, through your own gate on to the towpath, which you were foolish enough to show me that first day!"

"I'll do it, Mirry. I told you before that you could always depend on me to try and get you out of a scrape, whatever it cost me! Please tell me what I am to do."

"You've got to be the elderly relative again—for Oliver this time."

"All right. But don't let me be too many people. I'm not very clever at this sort of thing—I'm not an actress, you know!"

He could not understand why she stared at him so hard. He looked at her enquiringly, for her to enlighten him. He thought she must be correcting his grammar, and said, ". . . Actor."

"I was waiting for that," she said, welcoming the digression. "Do you know why I came down here this morning?"

"To tell me this, I suppose."

"More than that: I came to ease your conscience."

"To ease my conscience! I like that!"

"Yes: so that you might be able to say truthfully that I had visited you, if the occasion arose."

"It wouldn't be very truthfully."

"No, but it would make the lie much easier to tell. Oh, Jim, if you knew how I hate telling lies! But I can't help it, if Oliver Gray will go on trying to make me be his wife!"

"Then, really, Mirry, the best thing for you to do would be to let bygones be bygones, and let him marry you!"

"That is impossible!" she said.

"Well, as you can't alter your feelings—I should say, as you seem to be unable to alter your feelings, I'll give Miss Paula to understand, if she refers to me, that you have been visiting me. For how long was it?"

"From Wednesday night till Tuesday morning. I have been away from Paula for five and a half days. You can phrase it as you like."

"Oh, it's five or six days, I suppose, or is it nearly a week?"

"I don't mind," said Mirabel. "I've given you the facts. And you're a dear, good Jim!" she said, getting up suddenly, and giving him a hasty kiss as good-bye, and leaving by the towpath gate to quicken the parting.

"You're not going into the river?" he said, with mock alarm, as she went out of the gate.

"Not if you do as you're told, Jim."

She had felt that she could not stand another minute. It was horrible, to make such a man tell lies to wriggle out of a trouble which was none of his making.

CHAPTER XXXIX

RESPECTING A WHITE LIE

IT was lucky that she had gone down to the Hermitage, for one of the first things which Archie said at lunch was :

" Has your change done you good, Mirry ? "

" You can tell better than I can—how am I looking ? "

" Mirabel ! " said Paula severely. " If you start like that, Arch . . . Lord Avondale will ' rag ' all through lunch, and you know how I hate ' ragging ' ! " Secretly she enjoyed it intensely, but she was always afraid of them getting out of hand.

If she hesitated to call him Archie, he had no hesitation in calling her Paula.

" Paula," he said, " you needn't be frightened ! She won't let me ' rag '—she hasn't got over it yet. She would hardly let me speak to her last night."

" Last night ? " said Paula. " Where did you see her ? "

" In the theatre."

It was Paula's turn now. " Is that what she meant by saying that she was sitting in the front of the house, watching how her understudy played—watching how the play went, and that sort of thing ? "

Mirabel coloured. " I was sitting right back in the stage-box," she said, " and Archie spotted me, and sent round to be allowed to join me, not having seen me for six whole days."

" You haven't told me where you've been yet," he said.

Paula, who had naturally asked Mirabel where she was going, and had been allowed to believe that she was going to Lord Douglas, without actually being told so, said, " You'd better ask your father."

" Have you been to the governor's, Mirry ? " he asked, because he was rather surprised that he had heard nothing about it.

" Yes."

" At Richmond ? Lor' ! what a place to go to for Christmas ! When you might have gone to the *Metropole* at Brighton, or . . . ! "

"Can you picture me going to the *Metropole* at Brighton, Archie? What have I done that you should think me capable of going to that odious place, to see all the women who disgust me most at the theatre?"

"That's just what I don't know," he said.

"Well, as Paula says, you can ask your father."

Both Paula and Archie had the delicacy not to ask if Lady Douglas was there, or to mention her name. Both of them felt instinctively that, though his mother adored Mirabel, and saw much more of her than his father did, it would have spoiled Lord Douglas's enjoyment to have Lady Douglas there at the same time as Mirabel, because she would have monopolized the entire conversation with long-winded anecdotes about her *salons*, and might have crowned everything by asking some of the *salon* down to the Hermitage, from which they had been excluded like lepers. Archie felt also that if Mirabel had been spending Christmas with his father, it would have been the most enjoyable Christmas which he had had for years. Only why have her down to a rotten place like Richmond, when he could have taken her down to the said *Metropole* at Brighton, or to Scots Castle, that mediæval stronghold on the Tweed, with its trophies, which had never been removed from it, going back to the days of the Bruce? Archie did not think of it in these words; he simply thought of it as their principal seat, which Mirabel, as a dutiful member of the family, must want to see. He ended by thinking that probably, if his father liked Mirabel only half as well as *he* did, it would not matter to him where they were, so long as there was no one else there. He, of course, would have regretted even his mother's company, which his father might have welcomed, if only she could have restrained her conversation.

Paula, for once, agreed with this latter frame of his mind. She felt convinced that if Lord Douglas could have his talks with Mirabel undisturbed, one place would be just the same as another to him. And both she and Archie were perfectly well aware that if Mirabel had gone to Lady Douglas and said, "Jim has asked me to spend Christmas with him at Richmond," Lady Douglas would have said directly, "I hope you can go—it'll give the dear old chap such pleasure!" or something of the kind.

So they accepted the situation without further comment

or thought, and Mirabel found herself saddled with another imaginary visit to Lord Douglas, the details of which would have to be carefully thought out, in case the conversation ever turned upon something which she might have done there. She felt like J. M. Barrie, when he had used a brother for an excuse, and found that he had to have a brother for ever afterwards, upon whose motives or history he might be challenged at any moment.

And Archie was so much in love with Mirabel that he was glad that his father had taken such a fancy to her.

Mirabel did not feel thoroughly at ease until Archie was out of the house. But, providentially for her, both Archie and Paula thought that they understood the situation so perfectly that good taste forbade any further allusion to it. Certainly the stars in their courses fought for Mirabel, who did not deserve any celestial interference.

CHAPTER XL

MIRABEL GOES TO SOUTHAMPTON TO SEE HER HUSBAND OFF

MIRABEL saw no occasion for making any mystery of her intention to see Gray off from Southampton on the last night of the battered Old Year, 1914. She even went so far as to take Paula with her.

It might have been different if Gray had been able to do as he wished—come up to London, as much beforehand as they would let him, and go down from Waterloo to Southampton. But before Mirabel paid her visit to Westernport the War Office had decreed that he was to change on to the South-Western at Exeter, and go from Exeter to Southampton, with a number of mixed units who were being sent from Westernport to France.

For one reason he was glad. If he had been in London only one night, he would have had to spend half of it with his people at the theatre—and what was left of the Stalls—in a tremendous send-off. Such a popular man as he was with all who had anything to do with the *Babylon* could not have escaped that. And Mirabel must have taken a leading part in such a function. There was not the slightest reason why anything should have transpired about his desire to have

Mirabel for his wife, or her going down to Westernport to spend Christmas near him : that, at any rate, with any decent luck, would have remained a secret. But though no one in the theatre knew his desires as definitely as Archie, whose lips were sealed, or Paula, everybody knew that he admired her immensely, and used to say that she could have him by lifting her little finger, or the equivalent. There was, therefore, a pretty considerable chance, amid the flow of champagne and sentiment, as they gave their beloved chief Godspeed for the front, that some affectionate and imprudent orator would wish him some species of good luck which would make them both feel horribly shy. He would almost rather go without a private good-bye than face those public good wishes.

They had not to be on board the boat until midnight, and the train, with Gray and Worboys and Young, and the rest of a job lot of officers and small drafts who were going to be pitchforked into France, arrived at Southampton before eight o'clock.

Gray, of course, knew the best place to have dinner in Southampton, and forthwith invited Mirabel and Paula and the delighted subs. to have a farewell dinner with him there. Paula had been warned by Mirabel not to disclose by the slightest hint that Gray and Mirabel were the Oliver Gray and the Mirabel Douglas of the *Babylon Theatre*. And Worboys and Young and Mirabel (by letter) had been warned with equal severity by Gray not to disclose to Paula by the slightest hint that they had met before.

The fun in Worboys' eyes almost betrayed them. Mirabel felt that she did not understand subs. Why should he see anything so screamingly funny in it ?

Fortunately, Paula, who, like most women of her age, adored subs., pictured them in a perpetual delirium of "ragging"—even in their sleep. She was glad that Mirabel was quite friendly with them the moment they met, for she rather expected her to retire with Gray out of earshot, and leave them to her as if she were a sort of cloakroom. She was also very pleased with the impression that Mirabel made on them.

Gray, too, disappointed her agreeably. He seemed to want to make a jolly party of it, instead of fishing for a *tête-d-tête*.

The hotel to which they went made a practice of giving dinner when the boat-trains came in, so they did not have

long to wait. The manager also appeared to know that an officer taking his last dinner in England, with his sweetheart when it was possible, would like to have a good dinner, and that those who had no sweethearts would like an even better dinner, and to make it last as much of the interval between eight and twelve as possible. The waiter, when a dinner was ordered, said, "Yes, sir—war-marriage, or field-officer?" It flattered a sub. to be taken for a field-officer because he had not got a sweetheart, and made him willing to pay for the (much) more expensive dinner.

Gray ordered five field-officers' dinners.

From the oysters onwards he exerted himself to be as brilliant and amusing as possible. And he could be extremely amusing, because he had seen more life, in the *Babylonian* sense of the word, in his twenty-seven years than probably any man in London under thirty. Paula did not know which to admire most, his brilliance or his determination that he would be *l'allegro* and not *il penseroso* in his last hours with Mirabel. She wondered why Mirabel could not love him well enough to accept him. He looked such an ideal Briton—Paula never used the word "Englishman" when she was high-falutin'—with his tall, athletic figure in khaki, and his handsome, fearless face weatherbeaten by the winds and spray of Westernport. Since he had been in love, too, every disagreeable suggestion had vanished from his face.

They had not begun dinner very long when there was a fresh addition to the company. Their waiter brought a card, which bore only three words :

Earl of Douglas

and said could he see the gentleman? He would not keep him a minute.

"I came to give you a cheer as you went off, Gray, so if you will tell me when and where the boat sails, I'll be there to take charge of the ladies when she has gone."

"No, no, Lord Douglas—don't go! Come and join us at dinner, we have hardly begun."

"I can't eat two dinners, my dear Gray, and I had one in the train coming down. But I'll come and take a glass of wine with you, to drink your health."

Mirabel, suddenly catching sight of him, called out, "Oh, Jim, how sweet of you to come!"

Paula shook hands with him like a family friend. Worboys wondered if it could possibly be *he*, and exchanged a little smile with Young when Gray said, "Lord Douglas, may I introduce Mr. Worboys and Mr. Young, who are under orders to go to France with me to-night?"

"Very glad to meet you both! Good luck and safe return to you! My only son is in the Army, and about your age."

Worboys, who had been sitting on Mirabel's other side, made room for Lord Douglas between them. "Take my place, sir," he said. They must be very great friends, he argued, or she would not call a man so much older than herself "Jim."

"No, no, my boy, sit where you are!" But he made no objection to taking the place which Paula offered him between herself and Gray, because it would enable Gray to devote himself to Mirabel, which he knew he must desire, and give him the opportunity of saying a word to Gray from time to time. Meanwhile, he devoted himself to Paula, whose wit always gave him great pleasure, and the boys, who were likewise much entertained by Paula's conversation, though they might have preferred talking to Mirabel.

About 10 p.m. Gray, after a long and earnest conversation with Mirabel, closed the book, as it were, and devoted himself to entertaining the company with no more ado than if they were dining at a restaurant in London, and all going home again when the dinner was over. They were soon all in the highest spirits once more. Lord Douglas, who had not got over the House of Lords habit of using the tags he had learnt at Eton, quoted Horace:

*"Nunc vino pellite curas;
Cras ingens iterabimus aequor."*

"Can't you give us a quotation?" said Mirabel to Worboys. "You left school much more recently than Lord Douglas!"

"I can only quote the *Tatler*," he said, with a grin at Young. At the same time he pulled out of his pocket a well worn picture from the *Tatler*, which Gray, to his horror, recognized as a cutting from the page that had struck him on that first day at Round Table Fort, when he was turning over back numbers while he was waiting: "The Aristocracy in

Musical Comedy—Miss Mirabel Douglas, cousin of the Earl of Douglas.” Fortunately Worboys had either missed the paragraph below it, or had not connected Second-Lieutenant Gray, R.G.A., with the Oliver Gray, Junior, of the *Babylon Theatre*, for there was evidently no recognition in that direction.

Mirabel recognized it at a glance, for she had her press-cuttings sent to her by Old Mac—at Gray’s request, of course.

“ Give me that, you naughty boy ! ” she demanded.

“ What for ? ” he asked—“ to autograph it for me ? ”

“ No, to tear it up.”

“ Do autograph it for me ! I’ve got a fountain-pen, and I would so awfully like to have an autographed portrait of you to remember to-night by, when I get a billet at the front ! ” It was on his lips to add, “ And that night at the Island by,” but he remembered in time.

“ You know I can’t resist that word ‘ front ’ ! ” she said.
“ Give me your pen.”

He came round to her to give her his Onoto, and she signed it, and he folded it up very carefully, and laid it in his pocket-book.

“ Did you know who I was when I was at the Island, Mr. Worboys ? ” she asked, in a voice which no one could overhear.

“ No, I didn’t know till yesterday, when I took a pair of scissors, and started sneaking pretty faces from the old *Tailors* in the mess. They wouldn’t take much room, and I thought that to look at them would buck me so when we were having a slack time in the trenches.”

“ If I can do that for you, I shall have achieved something more useful than singing to the Stalls at the *Babylon* ! ”

And then he set Gray’s mind at ease by saying, “ That’s rather rough on you, Gray, isn’t it ? I suppose that you’re one of those dukes who sit in the stalls of the *Babylon*, trying to give the girls a chance ? ”

“ Indeed, I’m not ! I never take a stall at the *Babylon* ! ”

“ I thought you would have been just the man ! Are you a frequenter of the *Babylon*, sir ? ” he asked Lord Douglas.

“ How can you ask,” was the reply, with a little bow to Mirabel, “ when you have just informed us that we have the honour to be in the society of its leading lady ? ”

“ Have I done wrong ? ” said Worboys penitently, to

Mirabel. "I was so awfully bucked at finding that I knew the leading lady at the *Babylon!*!"

"No. My cousin, of course, knows that I act there, and Miss Maitland knows that I act there, and you have let Mr. Young into the secret, I suppose?"

"But Gray?" he said—"Gray's the one who I thought might have been annoyed—have you told him?"

"No, I didn't tell him, but I think he knows. All men know a thing like that."

"We didn't at the Mess the night you sang for us, or, by Jove, you would have had a reception!"

"I liked meeting you as just a girl much better. Being such an inferior being, I was able to ask questions about you all, instead of being asked questions about myself."

By and by Gray got into earnest conversation with Mirabel again, while Worboys and Young stared at her, wide-eyed, and Paula was at her best with Lord Douglas.

And so the night sped, till Gray suddenly called for the bill, which necessitated a bringing-out of five-pound notes.

When the waiter brought him his change, and had salaamed over his tip, Gray said, "I think we had better make a move for the steamer. Waiter, put our things in a couple of taxis. You'll come with Mirabel and Miss Maitland and myself, won't you, Lord Douglas?—the taxis here hold four all right."

"No, I'm sure I won't! I have more respect for Miss Maitland's dress. I'm going to take her in a separate taxi! And, by the bye," he said, "you'll find this useful in France; it was the real object of my coming down. You can put it on in the cab."

"Whatever it is, thanks so much!" said Gray. "Now, in we jump, or we shan't be on board this year, and that's, I suppose, why they gave us the order 'Midnight on the thirty-first'!"

In the cab Mirabel broke open the seals of the package, and took out its contents. He was too occupied with gazing fondly at her. It proved to be an *Argus*—the most wonderful combination wrist-watch ever invented—fitted on to a snap-lock bracelet. She clasped it on his left wrist.

"As they claim that you can bathe in it, I shall never have it off till I come back," he said. "I take it as an omen, Mirry."

"Then it would have been better locked on my wrist,"

she said gently. " You need no binding—it is I. But one thing I can promise you faithfully, Jack—you will be in my thoughts just as much, and more, when you are in France than when you are in England. Every day, then, even more than when you are here, I shall ask myself the question why I can't do it. I don't know why I can't, but I can't, Jack, though I would so willingly do it if I could. I'll keep the box of your watch to remind me, if you don't want it."

" I haven't an ounce of room for it, if I did—we're so limited."

" It's a watch-stand as well as a case, so I'll use it to lay my own wrist-watch on at night. I will keep it on the book-shelf of my bed."

" Hullo ! here we are at the boat ! "

The steamer was not going to start till the morning, but as a precaution against treachery by spies, there was a tug waiting to tow her fifty yards from the quay, to buoys, where she would be moored for the night. Lord Douglas happened to know the embarkation officer, whose duty it was to give the word for the steamer to be cast off and towed to the buoys : and the officer happened to be a Scotsman, so he was persuaded to allow the casting-off to be postponed for half an hour, the matter being entirely in his discretion, and only fixed for midnight in order to get the relations who were seeing officers off away to their beds.

Consequently, a few minutes before twelve " Auld Lang Syne " rings were formed on the quay, and 1914 passed into 1915 to the strains of Burns's immortal farewell.

The moment the last stroke of twelve rang out all the steamers in Southampton Harbour whistled and hooted to usher out the most fateful year since the beginning of History.

And a few minutes later the embarkation officer made a mate with a stentorian voice shout, " All aboard ! "

Gray had just expressed to Lord Douglas his thanks for presenting him with a souvenir which he could use every day while he was at the front—it had every device which a super-watch was capable of having—when they heard the " All aboard ! " Relatives embraced each other ; friends grasped hands with all the eloquence which can be put into human touch ; the merest acquaintances called out God-speeds of varying intensity.

Lord Douglas had a feeling of thankfulness when he saw

Mirabel throw herself into Gray's arms and yield him a long and fervent kiss. Worboys and Young could not help looking conscious : they were bursting with pride that the beautiful leading lady of the *Babylon* should have embraced a subaltern in their own Company on Southampton Quay.

CHAPTER XLI

A STORMY VOYAGE TO FRANCE

AT daylight the boat sailed. The passage was so rough that Gray, who was a yachtsman, and liked a "good sailing-breeze," was the only one of the three who kept his sea-legs.

Worboys, by extreme care in his choice of position, and a great effort, kept himself from being actually seasick, which was a point of honour with him. Young, a delicate, sensitive boy, who would have been rejected by most medical officers, but had had a point stretched in his favour because he brought such a brilliant character for cleverness from his head-master, was miserably ill.

It was very cold, and they had no rugs, because they were so limited in their luggage ; but Gray made the quarter-master fetch them the small sail, which was stowed away forward, and only used for steadyng the boat in extreme weather, and a couple of chairs, and wrapped himself and Worboys up from the wind.

"Thanks awfully !" said Worboys. "I'm letting you do things for me because I am feeling rather cheap, and don't want to give way altogether. I know you're an old salt."

" You see, we people who sail boats want a bit of wind before we can do anything, and consequently have to move about more in bad weather than good."

" How's Young ? " asked Worboys suddenly, remembering his companion in misfortune.

" In bed, trying to get some sleep ; he's been very sick."

" Poor chap ! You're a lucky one, Gray—quite fit, and with that girl to think about ! "

The last remark struck Gray as rather inconsequent. He did not see how having to part from Mirabel made things any easier for him, but Worboys continued :

"By Jove, she's a ripper! Fancy a chap like you being engaged to such a lovely girl as that!"

Gray winced, and Worboys put it down to the pain of the parting.

"And on the stage too! Actresses are so particular; there are not many who would look at a Second-Lieutenant in the R.G.A."

"No, I don't think there are."

"How did you get engaged to her?"

Gray winced again.

"You don't mind my talking about her, do you? It keeps me off thinking about being sick, and that's half the battle!"

"No, I don't mind your talking about her," said Gray. Though Worboys was sure to say things which roughed his nerves all the time, it might, after all, be something to be able to discuss the beloved one with a sympathetic listener. So he allowed Worboys to proceed

"Well, of course, a girl as beautiful as that, and leading lady at the *Babylon*, might expect to marry anyone—the heir to a peerage, at least!"

This suggested Archie most unpleasantly. It would have been a crushing blow if Gray had not happened to be her husband already.

"And a peer's cousin, too, which makes it worse!"

"No—better, I think. She had no need to be casting her nets."

"Well, so long as she didn't go on the stage for advertisement, perhaps that's sound."

Gray really felt as if he could have spanked the boy. The bare idea of connecting his wife with the women who went on to the music-hall and musical-comedy stage to advertise their beauty with a view to marriage was sacrilege to him.

"But you can see that she's not that sort," said Worboys patronizingly.

"No, I hope not." Worboys did not detect the ironical note in Gray's voice, and went on:

"And so jolly nice, too! She wasn't a bit bored with me and Young!"

"She would not be; she has the most charming disposition I have known in any woman I have ever met."

This was not true. It certainly was Mirabel's disposition

to be nice to everybody who did not disgust her—a large category at the theatre—but if she had been as good as he claimed, she would have overcome her prejudices and rewarded his honest devotion long ere this. He had been tried in the fire, and shown what pure metal he was, amply.

"How did you manage to get hold of her, Gray? I must say that it was rather smart of you!"

"Oh, I knew her before she was on the stage."

"And she's remained faithful to you in spite of all the offers she's had?"

"I don't think she's ever let them get as far as that."

"Must have! They'd do it by letter if she wouldn't see them!"

"She hands over all the letters she gets from people whom she does not know to me, and I send them to Paula—Miss Maitland, the lady you met last night. Miss Maitland is a novelist, and they might suggest ideas for her books."

He smiled as he thought how Worboys might, except for loyalty to himself, have contributed "copy" to Paula's books.

"Does Paula answer them?"

Gray lifted his eyebrows at the Christian name, but he replied: "I don't know; it would be good practice for her."

"I should feel small if I got an answer from Paula—laughing up her sleeve!"

"Well, that's what fellows have to risk who write to Miss Douglas!" It might do Worboys no harm to know.

It was almost like a personal snub to hear this, so Worboys felt constrained to say: "I hope you didn't mind my getting her to autograph that portrait of her from the *Tatler*, Gray?"

"I don't mind," said Gray, "if you'll swear not to let on to anybody in France that we're engaged, and will get Young to swear the same. If you do that, it will be, of course, a pleasure to me every time I come into your billet. You will put it up on the wall, I suppose?"

"No, I value it too much." But he added: "I might if we got settled enough for me to buy a frame from the Frenchies for it. I should like the other chaps to know that I knew her. It wouldn't matter their knowing that I knew her, would it?"

"No, I suppose not," he said, not altogether delighted. It seemed hard that Worboys should be able to claim her

friendship, and not he. "Remember that you'll have to swear, and get Young to swear," he insisted.

"Of course I shall!" said Worboys. "I'm proud to be your *confidant* about her."

"Well, that's all right," said Gray.

* * * * * * *

Young, meanwhile, with a temporary respite from sea-sickness through sheer exhaustion, was lying in his berth, with his face buried in the pillow, and his soul in gloom. His courage had all oozed out. Why had he been sent out when there were so many others who should have gone before him? Poor in physique, not yet twenty years old, he was not the man whom most commanders would have chosen for the front. At school, where he had applied for the commission, the prospect of directing long-range guns by mathematical calculations based on numbered maps and wireless messages from acroplanes, had appealed to him, a fine mathematician, who would have had a great career at Cambridge, as irresistibly interesting. And in spite of his physique, he had always been accounted plucky at football. But the stories of the retreat from Mons, exaggerated by rumour, and wrapped in all the horrors of mystery by the censor, had unnerved him. The Field Artillery there had been magnets for the fire of the heavy guns of the enemy. Some of the batteries had hardly an officer left, and the enemy were firing at a range which prevented the field gunner from firing a shot in his own defence.

Added to which, now that he was going to face them, the climatic conditions of the front seemed to be crushing for his feeble constitution.

As he lay there, worn out with sea-sickness, he had an idea that even if he escaped the shell-fire of the enemy, he would succumb in a few weeks, perhaps in a few days, to the hardships of the trenches. He did not realize that there were no Siege Artillery in the trenches. Its officers had not even been sent to observation-posts in the trenches in those days. The trenches were merely a vague expression for mud and water up to your ankles or knees, icy winds, rain and shrapnel falling in an unbroken shower, only varied by monster shells which rent the earth, and spread universal death like earthquakes. The attacks of Infantry, meaning swift death for

one side or the other, did not lie heavy on his imagination like the being shot at without a chance of replying, and the inconquerable obstacles to health.

How he wished he had had the courage not to join the Army ! At school it had seemed impossible that any man of spirit, whom the doctors would pass, should not join the Army immediately.

He felt the being cut off from Worboys' robust personality —Worboys, who had no imagination, and never thought about difficulties or dangers till they were right under his nose, and he was asked to rush them at the head of his men. Worboys, who had the temperament of a Tommy, and who was as brave as a bulldog, escaped half the terrors of danger because he never thought of it. And his *insouciance* was something for Young to lean on.

At intervals Gray came in to see Young, and offer him remedies and drinks. And for more than an hour he sat with him in that cabin, made stifling with sea-sickness. Worboys would have done the same if the penalty had not been so obvious.

On a rough day at sea an ordinary man can be a king among extraordinary men if they are victims to sea-sickness, and he is not.

Lunch was to be served on board before they left, and Gray tried to get Young up for it. He assured him that they would be in waters as calm as the Thames at London Bridge, but had no rejoinder for Young's protest that he could not begin to dress until that happy consummation had been achieved.

Worboys' spirits, on the other hand, rose like mercury when the waves were left behind, and anchor was dropped in the river, abreast of the queer houses, washed cream, yellow, pink and Cambridge-blue, which rise up from the quay, and make Havre a southern city. He ate such an enormous lunch that for very shame he had to comfort Young, who came to sit beside them towards the end of the meal, by reminding him that he had saved the price of a lunch by going without.

CHAPTER XLII

EN ROUTE FOR THE FRONT

THE three Second-Lieutenants felt a sort of thrill when they stepped on to the shores of France in time of war, as their fathers had done in the old time before them. Even Young, exhausted as he was, was not proof against this excitement.

The old streets of Havre were full of little knots of British officers, from new arrivals like themselves to the men with creased and faded military greatcoats (wherein every variety of device for keeping warm had been laid under contribution), and brown field-boots, almost black with greasing against the wet, and jovial, stern faces under their battered caps, who had just come from facing the enemy. While Thomas Atkins met you at every turn, that immortal man of Homeric simplicity and valour!

They found that the chief amusement of Havre for British subalterns was the big café, which they frequented for afternoon tea and other things. The first thing which pleased Worboys was an Indian Prince, wearing a full British uniform and a pearl necklace, and the second, a newly-landed Highland officer, filling part of the air of France with strange oaths because he had lighted his cigarette with a French match, before the sulphur had burned off. It was some time before he could do anything but cough. But inside of half an hour he had become experienced, not only in the ways of French matches, but also in the ways of the Countess Odelle and other ladies, who had come to the café to lure him to the primrose paths of dalliance.

When Worboys looked round for Gray to enjoy the dissipations with him, Young told him that Gray had gone to the *Cercle des Étrangers*, a club which had put up a notice in the Base Commandant's office that all British officers were free to use it while they were in Havre. He understood that he had gone there to write a letter, which seemed a natural thing for Gray to do. But in reality he was afraid

of being recognized as Oliver Gray by a chance *rencontre*. He said that he would wait for them at the Club, which, he was told at the office, no British officer had yet used.

The three subs. had only been at their camp outside Havre about a week, when they received their orders to entrain for the front.

The train crept along wearily. It took every bit of thirty-six hours from Havre to the rail-head behind the front. It was a supply-train, which looked about half a mile long—it certainly exceeded a quarter of a mile—and it changed its direction half a dozen times on that journey. But there was no direct line to where they were going, and the train doubtless could go much faster. Its main object seemed to be to arrive at night. It came to a dead stop about a dozen miles behind the trenches.

From here there was no means of reaching the town where the Headquarters were, except being carted in a motor-lorry. A ride in a motor-lorry on a French *pavée* is pretty rough work.

Those unfortunate Second-Lieutenants felt lost at every stage of their journey, for no one seemed able to give them a direct answer. Gray and Young, like good boys, directly they reached the Headquarters' town, reported themselves at Headquarters, and asked what they were to do, while Worboys went off to find some hotel or *estaminet* where he could get a glass of decent whisky. The only reply they could get from the sub. in temporary charge of the Headquarters office was, "Oh, someone will roll up and take charge of you presently!"

After waiting there for about an hour, Gray, determined as he was to feel cheery, began to feel as full of gloom as Young. Worboys, who had turned up in the interval, went off in desperation to see if there were any Artillery in the town who could answer a few questions. It resulted in his getting to the Artillery Headquarters, which were occupying one of the best houses. The Staff Captain there was so pleased with his sturdiness and his initiative that he welcomed him quite as a friend, and said, "Well, what are you?"

"Anything you like, sir," Worboys said—he was very polite.

"Oh, you're Siege, of course!"

"Very well, sir," said Worboys, though it filled him with despair, for he had not the vaguest idea of what constituted the new Siege Artillery, and had visions of awful mathematical instruments and terrible calculations.

"You three are to be attached to the 200th Siege," said the Staff Captain. "Just make your way out there."

"How, sir?"

The Staff Captain did not seem to have any idea, or to know very distinctly where the 200th were.

The best means of getting there which the three subs. could find was the Ration wagon of the Battery, which happened to be in town. Worboys rolled himself up inside to try and get some sleep; he was a philosopher, and quite willing to let Gray and Young have the places on the box-seat. With the enemy about, Young liked to be somewhere where they could see.

They drove at a walking-pace in the heaviest rain which even Gray had ever experienced. The road was about seven miles in length, and the whole way there the driver described the awfulness of everything. As his pictures were substantiations of the chimeras of Young's own imagination, the boy expected to be shelled or sniped at every yard of the road.

Gray pulled the driver up sharply. "What's the good of your grousing and pitching these yarns, when you can see how nervous my friend here is! I am ashamed of you; I never expected to hear a British soldier talk like this!"

"How can I see anything in this light?" said the man sulkily.

But he had done his mischief. It was the worst ride Young had ever had in his life. It did not mend matters when, towards the end of the journey, he discovered that they were to drive direct into the Battery. Young thought that they would be in the thick of everything, and had visions of disembarking under a heavy shell-fire.

The driver admitted candidly that he did not quite know where the Battery was. They had been shifted that day, because they had been shelled out of some place. He was a born grouser, and in spite of Gray's elbow left nothing undone towards filling the boy with despair.

However, when they did arrive, they found the Battery comfortably ensconced in a farm.

"There now!" said Gray, "I knew everything would be all right! Wake Worboys, will you?"

But their hopes, which had risen high, were soon dashed to zero, when the Major came out to inform them that their billet was not there, but still further to the front, and that the Germans were constantly shelling the road to it, on the look-out for another Battery, in fact, so that they must look out about falling into shell-holes.

Further, as there was no road, there was no means of getting there except walking, and the three Second-Lieutenants had to set out in the pitch-dark, as their first experience of war, their first hour under fire. They did not know where their billet was. But the enemy were sending up their horrid "starlights," and that gave the boys their direction, because their billet was somewhere between them and these "starlights."

As Worboys said, "It seems pretty easy to lose your way in a foreign country in the dark, when you have never seen the place before."

To add to the horrors of their inexperience, besides the fire-rockets, there was a large amount of enemy rifle-fire. The French Artillery, on their part, as they say in Subalternese, were "going it hard—brassing off." But it was quite an ordinary night for those parts, as they soon learned.

When they got to their billet, they found no one there but a French farmer and his wife, from the adjoining cottage. They did not seem in the least alarmed by being knocked up at night by three English officers, all of whom wore their revolvers, and they were quite willing to make a little by attending to them. But they could not speak a word of English, and even Gray could not speak a word of French.

The three Second-Lieutenants wondered if they ought to take their clothes off or not. Worboys decided to risk it, and took off his boots, his jacket and his breeches.

It was a stormy night, still raining as it rained on Noah's Ark. Their billet was in an evacuated house. Upstairs there was quite a fine bed, and Worboys, having divested himself of half his clothes, got into it, and Gray was inclined to follow his example in the next room, but poor little Young was so thoroughly upset that he would not even go upstairs, but making sure that there was a good supply of fuel for the fire which the farmer lighted for them, turned up the

collar of his big coat, and threw himself on the horsehair sofa. Gray, seeing the semi-hysterical condition he was in, refused to leave him, and pulling the best chair he could find in the room up to the fire, sat down, until Young might require him, and in two minutes had achieved it. Young dozed off from exhaustion.

CHAPTER XLIII

THE COMMONPLACES OF WAR

A BOUT half-past ten, when they were all having a sleep of sorts, they were suddenly startled out of it by the most appalling crash which they had ever heard in their lives. All three felt that their last hour had come. The monstrous crashes never ceased for one second. The whole house rocked till it reeled like a falling tree. Worboys sprang out of bed, and into his clothes. The Germans had, he was certain, learned in some underhand way that three British officers had come into the house, and were bombarding it. He wondered what was the routine for shells coming through the walls of a house, and expected to see one every second.

Gray, too, thought that his last hour had come. He bitterly regretted that it should have come on his very first day at the front, before he had had time to strike one blow for England. Still, he thought that one man can do mighty little but die for his country, and if he offers his life at the very beginning of a war, and finds himself dying for it, and finds that he has the courage to die for it as calmly as if he were playing cricket for his University, then he has finished what he began at School, and carried on at College—to be an every-day hero, *sans peur et sans reproche*, among his fellows. He was rejoiced to find that he did not fear death. He did not give a single regret to all he had cut himself off from, when he had but twenty-seven years—wealth and power, and the love of a woman renowned in all London for her beauty and charm—for she must love him well, though she would not live with him as a wife should, to have kissed him like that before Paula and her cousin and all the people on the quay.

No ! He was dying for his country, and he regretted nothing, except that he could slay no enemies before he was stretched on the floor. Suddenly his thoughts were diverted from himself by the strange noises that Young, over whom he had laid his own greatcoat, to make his sleep sounder, was making. Young was gibbering like a ghost, and as white as one. The firing may have caused it, but he was past understanding what the firing was ; he was mad with hysteria.

The only thing that Gray could think of was to grasp his hands, to keep him from trying to do any injury to himself, and because it was easier to touch his brain with the pressure of hands than with speech. It certainly calmed him, and that was something, as Death could only be a question of half an hour. Besides, there was nothing else which he could do till Worboys or the farmer made his appearance.

Worboys did not keep him long. He dressed in goodness knows how few minutes, and even at such a moment slid down the banister-rail to save time. He had recovered himself before he entered the room where Gray was, for his first remark was, " They've got us in the neck this time—we don't know where the dug-out is, and we don't know where our guns are, so there's nothing for it but to hope they'll miss us ! Good God ! what's the matter with Young ? "

" Off his head with hysterics," said Gray briefly.

" Lucky chap !—doesn't know what he's in for, like we do. What are you hanging on to him for ? Does he want to kill himself ? "

" I don't know," said Gray. " I'm doing it because it seems to comfort him."

" What a rum idea ! " said Worboys, just as he would have said it in the Mess-room at Round Table, though those appalling crashes of Artillery came every few minutes, and with each one it seemed as if their hour had come.

After thinking a minute, he began, " I say, Gray . . . "

" What is it ? " He spoke shortly ; he was not in any mood for foolery, and it would be so like Worboys to fool till his dying breath.

" Look here—I haven't got any people, and you've got Mirabel—I don't see why I shouldn't call her Mirabel if I'm just going to die . . . "

" You can call her Mirabel. I know what you're going to say, and I've been wanting to do it ever since Hell began,

only I had to hold poor Young's hands. Just hold them a bit, will you, while I write my good-bye letter—if we live long enough! I expect the Boches will send it on all right!"

Worboys took Young's hands from his with a gentleness of which Gray would never have suspected him.

Feeling the change, Young started. "Cheer up, Young! Don't be frightened—it's I, Worboys, who have taken Gray's place."

Worboys, too, had strong mesmeric hands, which soothed and quieted Young. The boy gibbered on at intervals, though he did not struggle, while Gray wrote his letter to Mirabel. Fortunately his pad and envelopes were in his haversack, the only luggage he had with him.

"B.E.F., France.

"Jan. -th, 1915.

"Mirry darling,

"This is to say good-bye. The end has come sooner than I thought. The Boches are shelling the house in which we three are. We only came up from the Base an hour or two ago. It's bad luck that they should have found us the first night. I've only a few things to say. One is that I have left everything I possess to you. You can tell people or not about—you know what—just as you wish.

"I'm not frightened of death, as I feared I might be. I thought you would like to know this, so as to have as good an opinion as you can of your faithful

"OLIVER GRAY.

"Good-bye, Mirry."

On the letter as well as the envelope was written :

"I ask anyone who finds this, be he English or German, to forward it to Miss Mirabel Douglas, *Babylon Theatre, London.*"

"I have done now, Worboys," he said. "Have you anything you want to write?"

"No—but I'll tell you what you can do for me. If you get through this, and I don't, you will find in my pocket-book that portrait, autographed 'Mirabel Douglas,' which

I cut from the *Tatler*. Keep it till you see her, and then give it to her from me. I've got a married sister, much older than me, whom I have not seen for years—anything of mine that gets to England ought to go to her. I don't know if she'll care for it or not, but I've got nobody else. Her name is Mrs. Elgood, Hertsbourne Manor, Herts. I know where your things are to go. If only one gets through, I hope that it will be you, for her sake."

Gray longed to groan aloud at the mockery of it. He could not tell Worboys how he feared that he had the better right to live on this strange theory—that Mrs. Elgood must miss a brother more than Mirabel would miss him, when it would free her from the bond into which she so bitterly regretted having entered.

"Let me take Young," he said. Even to have to concentrate his attention on Young would be a relief from this tyranny of doubt.

The three subalterns, having just arrived at the front, had not realized that these were their own guns. It was only another British Heavy Battery, firing at about fifty yards from their billet, carrying out its usual nightly performance. But it made the whole night terrible.

It seemed as if death would be the only end of it, when there came a rap, rap at the house-door, impatient and authoritative. Gray went and opened it—it could only be a friend: an enemy would try to surprise.

It was a British face, a sergeant of the military-police.

Seeing an officer, he said, "Oh, I beg your pardon, sir. I didn't know that it was an officer's billet. But you have lights showing to the front, you know, and you must cover them at once."

"I'll cover anything," said Gray, "if you'll tell me what that hell is, and why they haven't hit us yet, with all that letting-off of ammunition."

"Because they're firing the other way, sir: it's the British Heavy Battery in front of you. And as for the other matter, sir, don't let it worry you—I expect there'll be a German shell over here before long."

This man's explanations were the first reassuring word they had heard since they arrived at the front. He likewise seeing Young, said that he would send a doctor, who duly arrived, with an ambulance, shortly before midnight, and

when he had examined Young, gave orders for him to be taken to the Clearing Hospital.

"He'll be back in a few days," he said. He recommended Gray and Worboys to turn in, and do their best to sleep. "You'll get accustomed to it, now that you know that it's on your side."

It was clearly Worboys' right to return to the bed which he had been adventurous enough to occupy under such disconcerting circumstances when they first went there, and it was with something like exultation that he re-established himself on the top of a feather-bed which almost doubled the height of the bedstead, and was *the* bed of the house. The bed in Gray's room was a very modest affair compared to it.

Worboys had not been asleep above an hour when there was a tremendous bang on the wall in front of his dressing-table, followed by a thump underneath his back, as if the whole of the other side in a football scrimmage had kicked him simultaneously, and a sensation of the room being filled with cold and wet, and snow which was quite warm to the touch.

He was still lying there in a half-stunned condition when Gray, who had heard the crash, came in with his electric-torch in one hand and his revolver in the other, to see what had happened. He could hardly see Worboys at all; he was so buried in feathers, and other feathers were drifting about the room as thick as falling snow.

But the hole in the wall under the still uninjured window, and the wind blowing the cold and wet of the night through it, told its tale. *A German shell had come into Worboys' room, and exploded under the bed, and the feather-bed had smothered the explosion as if it had been filled with sand, instead of feathers.

Worboys snowed under with feathers, looked the most humorous sight imaginable: Gray went off into fits of laughter, in spite of the shock at the close shave from death which Worboys had just run. He held out his torch for Worboys, to exhume his clothes and put them on, and then the pair of them made a bundle of the blankets, and retired to the cellar.

* This actually happened.

When their old Frenchman came to wake them, the trail of feathers from the blankets guided him to their place of refuge, even by the light of his miserable little lamp.

Worboys referred to this incident as the paper-chase when he was telling the story to the Mess. It, at any rate, represented what he imagined the "Frenchy" had told him by signs.

Major Drewston had told Gray and Worboys to present themselves at the Battery at breakfast-time on the following morning. Worboys winced when he heard the hour, but had the sense to realize that this was not a great thing to worry about at the front, when just before daylight is one of the enemy's favourite hours for attack. Fortunately, they had their old Frenchman, who was accustomed to begin his morning in the middle of the night.

The Captain, Linacre, and two of the three subs. were there when they arrived, and the Captain, as soon as he had heard their tale, sent a sergeant round to see the damage and report to him. He was much impressed with Worboys' sang-froid when he received his report.

Gray and Worboys discovered that they were supernumeraries, not posted to any Battery, but attached to the 200th, so as to learn their work by seeing what the other officers did.

The subs. informed them, as soon as they were alone, that when they were not in the Observation Post, they would be able to do pretty much as they liked, because Major Drewston hated having supernumeraries attached to his Battery. They said that he was neither a keen man nor an efficient officer, but that the Captain, though a holy terror, was all right, and in case of a serious attack, would have to see the whole job through; the Major, it appeared, was very jealous of him, and would prevent his giving them, Gray and Worboys, much to do.

Gray felt scandalized and furious that such things should be possible at the front. Worboys smiled significantly. He was anxious to fight for his country, but the lazier he was allowed to be, when he was not fighting, the better it would meet his ideas.

The two subs. they were talking to, Sharp and Bagshawe, were quite ordinary, steady boys, who wished to do their duty in war, but displayed no initiative or hustle about doing

it. Do what he might, the Captain could not inspire them with his own keenness and energy. Major Drewston was the undoing of such boys. He was not fit to have command of anything in war or peace, because his disposition would always spoil the officers under him.

What Bagshawe and Sharp had told them seemed to be correct, because they were not given anything to do all day, though they wandered about and examined everything in the Battery, chiefly because Gray was keen, and Worboys, who was not at all a sentimental person, was fascinated with Gray. He had not the slightest idea who or what Gray was, though he had been on the brink of discovering it, and only missed it because he was too lazy to do anything except look at the pictures, even in a gossipy paper like the *Tatler*. But he was convinced that there was some mystery about him. Worboys was certain that the look of distinction and authority, which was so noticeable about Gray, in spite of his complete absence of "swank," meant something, though Gray never made the slightest allusion to his holding any position in life, except that of Second-Lieutenant R.G.A. He knew that Gray had been at Eton, because Lord Douglas had said at the dinner, "You'll meet dozens of the men you knew at Eton."

Gray, much as he felt the parting with Mirabel, was delighted to go to the front. Having joined the Army, he desired to learn the game and excel in it, as he had excelled at cricket and most other games which he had played much. Accordingly, he spent that entire day in studying every detail of a Battery in the fighting-line—the way in which the guns were concealed in one place, and the horses and wagons in another; the measures taken for making them invisible to aeroplanes; the way dug-outs are made; the way in which the officers and men are disposed for living and fighting; the kitchen and commissariat arrangements; and dozens of minor points.

One thing was obvious at once; the farm was left looking as like a farm as possible—in fact, the guns, in all probability, only escaped being buried in dung-heaps because the heaps form such very prominent objects in French farms.

Gray had asked the Major if somebody might show him round, and the Major had shown his absence of courtesy and

absence of sense in one breath by saying that it was quite unnecessary for a supernumerary officer to trouble himself about this. Gray said nothing in reply, but his look of blank disappointment and astonishment was not lost on Captain Linacre, who told Sergt. Spencer, one of the best men in the Battery, but incapacitated temporarily by a slight wound, to engage him in conversation, and offer to show him round if *Captain Linacre would give his permission*, which was the usual line followed in that Battery in correcting the Major's mistakes.

"The Major seems a bit sketchy, doesn't he," said Worboys.

Capt. Linacre suddenly asked the sergeant, "Have we received any bread yet?" Worboys made a mental note of this, and later in the day came in with eight loaves like the wheels of a luggage barrow which he had got off a Scottish regiment.

"Well, young man, you have one qualification for a soldier, anyhow. You appear to be a born looter."

It was not a bad way of discovering what kind of men the new subalterns were. Captain Linacre was aware that the sergeant would be able to give him a very shrewd estimate of them by the time that he had given them a day's instruction of this sort.

He had a private talk with him when he came back from the Observation Post at dark that evening, and learned that Gray had been taught very little, except the grounding he received from the Sergt.-Maj.-instructor at Westernport, but was extraordinarily keen and quite intelligent, while Worboys knew much less, and was neither keen nor intelligent, but would have made a first-rate fighting man for the Infantry. He thought he would take Worboys in hand first, so he said to him, "I want you to go down to the Observing Station with me to-morrow."

"How am I to get there?" asked Worboys; he meant no impertinence, but not in one single order which he had received had this important subject been mentioned.

"Ride," said the laconic Linacre.

"Ride what?" said Worboys—"a bicycle?"

"No, a horse."

"The idea of going through shell-fire on a strange horse, when I had not ridden for years, has kept me awake all night," said Worboys when he came in to breakfast the

next morning. "The horse worries me far more than the shell-fire. I wonder if I shall ever get there?"

In the course of the day before their modest luggage had arrived. So Worboys, in addition to the heavy fur-lined mackintosh in which he had slept so well on that awful drive from Headquarters, and had almost collapsed on the walk up to their billet as he stumbled about in the dark, came laden-up with various other articles, for the state of siege which he pictured in the Observation Post, since Captain Linacre had said, "Come well prepared." Hearing that he was no rider, the Captain had picked an absolutely quiet horse for him.

It was only with a great deal of help and a dreadful struggle that he ever climbed up on the saddle at all. That sheep-skin-lined coat was a bulky article. He looked more like a Chinese mandarin than a nineteen-year-old British officer on that pony—mandarins do ride ponies.

Once there, the weight of his mackintosh, and the extensiveness of his kit, helped to keep him on, the difficulties coming not from his horse, which was doing its best, but the holes in the road made by shell-fire. Though he did not actually come off, the jolting he received by the constant stumbling and efforts not to be thrown would have "knocked out" anyone less constitutionally tough than Worboys.

He and the Captain left their ponies on the road, for their orderlies to take back.

"When I heard the Captain say, 'We shall want you here about six o'clock,' my spirits fell to the ground, for it was only about six o'clock in the morning," Worboys told them at mess in the Battery farm that night.

Even he, hardy young cub that he was, rather dreaded the walk home after Mess. It is a dreary enough job at any time to leave a lot of companions sitting in their slippers over a hearty fire to turn out for a mile-walk in the pitch-dark but when that walk implies also winter, rain, slush up to your ankles, pitfalls dug by shells since you passed in the morning, and shells themselves, the big fish among shoals of shrapnel-bits and single bullets, crossing your path from time to time, human nature almost declines to endure it. Linacre could not imagine how the Major allowed it. He offered to let them shake down on the floor of his own little room. But Gray seemed to rejoice in mortifying the flesh. He had a craze

for the realities of war, and Worboys, though he would have liked to accept the Captain's offer, would not see Gray go alone. But, oh, how he hated that stumbling along in the puddles in the dark! He wished that Gray was not so grand.

When they left their horses, they ploughed their way across a muddy field, which was most exhausting for anyone with the weight of things which Worboys had on his back, to the Observation Post.

"Isn't this rather an unhealthy sort of a spot?" asked Worboys, when he heard the constant whistle of rifle-bullets and shells overhead.

"You needn't bother about them—they're not near," said the Captain.

"They seem too near altogether to me," answered Worboys, who felt that the Captain could not have said less under any circumstances, when he was keeping up the spirits of a novice.

When they got to the Observation Post, which was in a strongly-built brewery, the Captain said, "Take that woolly-bear off—you'll have to swarm up a couple of ladders to get to the top of the building, where we have to go; there never has been such a thing as a staircase here; one of the men will carry it up for you."

"I'll take it off all right, but I can carry it up myself," said Worboys. "I'm much more at home on the top of a ladder than I am on the top of a horse."

The Captain proceeded to show him, through two funny little slits in the roof, where the enemy's trenches were.

"What is this place?" asked Worboys. "It looks like a cross between a chimney and a steeple."

"Something to do with the brewery," said the Captain.

"It isn't at all clear to me," said Worboys, "which are the enemy and which are our own people. They both seem to have been ploughed in, and those who have not been planted in the furrows" (he referred to the rows and rows of trenches) "are muddled up with a whole lot of brick-stacks. The one thing I can make out is that the railway-embankment is entirely held by the enemy."

"Yes, damn them," said the Captain. "At the beginning of the war railway-embankments were only railway-embankments to our people, and the Germans knew that

they were first-class fortresses, which knocked poor old Maubeuge into a cocked hat!"

It was a very quiet day: nothing happened at all. So at evening they trudged back another way across that field, passing numerous French graves—which would have completed Young's demoralization if he had been there: it had been raining hard all day—to the road where the horses, which had been telephoned for, were waiting, at a spot which was then considered safe. It reminded Worboys more of a hive when bees were swarming than anything else, and even the Captain observed that it would be better to keep the horses further down the road, since there was a gap in the ruined village right in front, and all kinds of "hate" came whistling through. On the next day he had them shifted lower down the road.

Worboys soon discovered that though Capt. Linacre was the fighting man in the Battery, he never neglected any precaution which could be observed. It was the Major who took chances—for other people. He never went to the Observation Post himself.

It was Gray's turn to go and see how things were done the next day, and he went with Bagshawe; it was the Captain's day off. It was a quiet day; the Battery was doing nothing.

"We're lucky," said Bagshawe. "When we're doing nothing ourselves, there's less chance of the Boches favouring us." He could not understand Gray's obvious disappointment at being in the post when our guns were doing nothing. "You see, if we're firing, they fire," he explained.

"That's what we're here for," said Gray. "I'm willing to take any chance, if I can see our guns in action."

"Well, it is interesting, of course," admitted Bagshawe. "But I'm no longer interested in interesting things. I'm sick of the whole thing; I want to get out of it. I'm fed up with going backwards and forwards to Observation Posts."

As nothing had happened the day before, Gray had to go down to the Observation Post again, this time with the Captain.

"He's a chap after your own heart, Linacre," Bagshawe had said, when he returned the night before. "He's always asking for the enemy!"

As they were crossing the field, Gray had his first experience of being shot at by a sniper, who "spotted" them, and put three bullets near enough for them to hear the angry whirr.

"That was near," said Gray, as he had so often said before.

This time the Captain did not pick him up, but said, "Quick—into that shell-hole!"

The whirr of a bullet which is really near is totally different to the drone of a bullet passing overhead.

So things went on, till one day the Captain thought Worboys, whose turn it was to accompany him for instruction, sufficiently advanced for him to say, "I suppose you'd like to do a little shooting now, wouldn't you?"

He made him repeat the various terms for instructing the Battery by 'phone, and suggested that he should shoot at a brickstack which the enemy held.

They saw the shell land, but nowhere near where it was intended to go. They did not know what was wrong. But they tried the prescription again, and knocked a large chunk out of another brick-stack.

A few minutes later a Guardie arrived, and was quite nice about it, but disclosed that the first shell had landed in the Guards' communication trench.

That was Worboys' first shot at the enemy. It was fortunate that it had no results.

After this they stopped for the day, having fired about three shots altogether. At this period they had a daily allowance to make themselves unpleasant with and used to husband it rigidly for annoying the Germans as much as they could on such a stingy supply.

The next time Worboys went to the Observation Post he had only Gray with him. He made Gray jump into several shell-holes while they were crossing that field, to get out of the way of shell which were coming over. The Germans were beginning to take an interest in this Observation Post, and showed it with large quantities of their fifteen-pounder field-guns, which are called *whiz-bangs*, so Bagshawe had informed him, because you hear the *whiz* and the *bang* at the same time, if the gun is anywhere close.

Worboys thought that their shells were coming rather near, and was pretending to make himself scarce from one,

when it hit the building under his feet. Nothing happened : it was a very good building. But Worboys said to Gray, " Suppose it had hit the building a few feet higher up, where should we be ? Would the old sandbags keep it out ? "

" I think it would depend on whether our numbers were up or not," said Gray.

It was not long before they saw what would happen. A shell struck the other corner of the room they were in. It burst with a terrific crash, swept away half the wall in a cloud of shrieking splinters and a desert sandstorm of brick and plaster, cleared away the woodwork and threw the sandbags all over the room. But they consoled themselves with the idea that that corner was not anything like so well-built as their own, and that this was the reason why there was no one in it. While they were reasoning this out a shell whooped close over their heads and burst just behind them, then one, two, three in quick succession fell just short and burst in front of them, then two more burst just beyond again.

To pay the Germans out for the scare which they had received, Worboys suggested shelling the enemy's redoubt every time that they shelled our people. This was quite a ticklish business, because there was only about a hundred yards dividing the two front trenches. So that when the Observation officer ordered the enemy's front trench to be shelled, the shell of his own guns dropped unpleasantly close to his own trench.

" It's all very well, Worboys," said Gray, " but I must confess how relieved I am when I see that we have missed our own people."

What was true of one day was true of another for weeks and weeks. It disgusted Gray that our guns had no plan of their own, but merely fired back when the Germans started shelling.

Whenever the Germans had got in a new supply of ammunition, they produced a daily programme, as Worboys said. They used to start with the village—what there was left of it : then they went to the buildings round the canal bridge ; then they crossed over to the buildings on the other side : and they ended up with trying to get a shell into his Observation Post. The two subs. used to watch them ranging. They would get one short, and another a bit nearer : then

they would probably go into the garden behind, and it was time for the Battery to go to the cellar.

Gray and Worboys were unable to reply, because they did not know where the German guns were. The Germans usually hit the Observation Post about half a dozen times a day.

"Big stuff!" cried Worboys, whenever a six-inch shell came smashing into the post. But the place in which they were observing was never hurt, because there was an unfortunate *estaminet* in front.

"It's rather hard that the poor pub should get it all," said Gray.

"I don't see it," said Worboys—"an *estaminet*'s a 'place of entertainment under the Act,' isn't it?"

When the Germans had finished, the Battery came out of the cellar, and resumed its occupation of observing for nothing.

"It takes away all feeling of rest to have this 'small stuff'—these *pip-squeaks* and *whiz-bangs* and rifle-bullets coming over you all day," said Worboys, "but they don't count, because our old brewery is so thick-skinned!"

Finding the Observation Post so dull, the Germans turned their guns on the village. And they often looked round for an armoured train, which used to worry them, or another Battery well to the rear, before they ceased firing.

They could never silence that German Battery till one day the Captain told Worboys to shoot at a brewery, in which he had seen people moving about. Worboys, as usual, got the range entirely wrong, but that misdirected shell must have found the offending battery, because it stopped firing for ever afterwards.

War was brought very close to them as they were returning along the communication-trench to the place where their horses were waiting that night; there was a German gun firing over their heads, and German shells kept passing.

"Worboys," said Gray, "those attentive people are shelling the crest of the road over which we shall have to ride. We must time it between two shells, and hug the wall."

"Right you are!" said Worboys, with the laugh of a child who is playing Tom Tiddler's Ground. "We'll let about ten of them go by so as to give them beggars a chance

of using up their ‘hate’ while we are finding out how to time them, and then over we go ! ”

“ You’d better let me do it,” said Gray—“ I made a hundred against Cambridge, and am accustomed to judging the flight of a ball.”

“ Oh, let me ! ” pleaded Worboys. “ I should enjoy it so ! ”

“ All right,” said Gray. “ But remember that we are betting our lives on it ! ”

“ Here goes ! ” cried Worboys. He thought he had timed it to a T, but the shell burst only about fifteen feet behind him. Gray timed it better, and let it burst well in front of him. All he said was :

“ That was rather a late cut of yours, Worboys—I expected to see you . . . or, rather, I did not.”

But the last word was with Worboys, for another shell fell unpleasantly close behind them. “ Hurry up ! ” he said, “ this is no time for gassing ! ”

And some French soldiers who were passing shouted : “ Souvenir ! Souvenir ! ” which meant, “ Look out for shells ! ”

“ ‘ Souvenir ’ seems to be the only English word that the French know,” said Worboys.

* * * * *

Gray and Worboys took their turn with the rest regularly. It enabled the Captain to have two officers together in the Observation Post, with proper intervals for rest, even if someone was temporarily laid up. The Major had not once been to the post since they had arrived.

Going up and down to the Observation Post was always more or less the same—big and little risks all the time. Worboys quite fascinated Gray by his light-hearted humour whenever he expected the next moment to be his last. Every time a shell made them throw themselves down he had a fresh piece of schoolboy cheek for it. But directing gunfire was not his line. One day he was trying to silence a German Battery which they had located : the first three shells he directed he never saw at all—they were far too short. So he ceased firing, but presently a Staff Officer came in, wildly excited, saying “ Grand ! Grand ! Right in each time ! ”

Worboys did not know what he was talking about, and felt a little nervous, as an Artillery officer always does when

he does not know where his shell are going to. The Staff Officer explained that they had landed plump in the enemy's trenches. They were at least eight hundred yards from what he was shooting at.

But this time it was not his fault, for Gray, getting this lead as to where their shell were going, worked the whole thing out, and discovered that the guns were shooting six hundred yards short, because they were wrongly sighted. When he had discovered this error, he took over the direction, and enjoyed himself in knocking about a large, undamaged red-brick mansion, which the Germans had used for many purposes. They had fires and other comforts in it, which was distressing—besides using it for an Observation Station.

Worboys was green with envy, but he did not want the Staff Officer to see what a bad shot he was, so he let Gray go on, and Gray, improving on that happy misdirection, drove the German Battery off.

These domesticities were interrupted by a real battle—Neuve Chapelle.

CHAPTER XLIV

SAYING GOOD-BYE TO ARCHIE

SAYING good-bye to Archie was very different from saying good-bye to Oliver Gray, for he went with his Regiment.

There was an immensely long special train down to Southampton for the relatives, and such of the officers as were not required for entraining the men, and the band of the Cold-stream Guards had been sent down in advance to play them on board the transports.

Lord and Lady Douglas, Mirabel and Paula, accompanied Archie. Archie wrote Paula a special note, begging that she would accompany Mirabel and his parents. He was afraid that she would feel hurt if they went without her, and, though he did not think of this, did himself a good turn, for Mirabel felt the parting so deeply that but for Paula's urging she might not have had the courage to face it.

The Socialistic Paula enjoyed every minute of it all. Her heart swelled with pride at having been specially invited by the most brilliant boy in the Regiment—the beautiful

and dashing young heir of The Douglas—to go as “family” with his father and mother and the cousin he loved.

Archie was in boisterous spirits. Not even the prospect of parting from Mirabel could damp his enthusiasm at going with his Regiment to the front. He was the true spit of the Black Douglas and Archibald the Grim and all the other Sir Jameses and Sir Archibalds and Sir Williams who had carried the Douglas banner into battle after battle in the Scottish wars, until the battle came from which they were carried home on a shield instead of riding on their black chargers.

Mirabel was thankful that he was in this mood, for it exorcized sentiment, and the parting was a tragedy to her.

When she had parted from her husband she felt the regret and anxiety which she would have felt at parting with any other friend as dear and faithful, had she possessed one. As a husband she could not regret him. The most she could do was to stifle the thought that the battlefield might free her from her life's mistake. She did stifle it, and wished him safe return from the bottom of her heart. The affection she yielded him was for his sake, not her own. She wished him to have no misgivings when he was going to the front to fight for his country. She tried hard to let him carry away with him the remembrances of a wife which should go with a soldier-husband, especially where she is beautiful. But she could not give him any of the regrets and longings which such a woman as she was ought to give to such a husband as he was.

And these poured out in a tempestuous flood to Archie, whom she had never so much as kissed, in her anxiety not to wrong her husband.

She sat smiling affectionately, but rather sadly, as Archie bubbled over. It was providential that he had invited Paula, for though she was sad at the idea of the beautiful Archie being torn away from London for the perils of the front, and was quite in love with him in an old-maidish way, she was not losing a son or a lover, and had the high spirits to retort to his sallies. The Aristocracy have a philosophy of their own in parting from their children. When the time comes for childhood to terminate they contemplate no other ending. A son has to go forth as a soldier or an administrator, a daughter to marry a soldier or administrator,

When the war came, the first thought of the Aristocracy was to fight for their country, and, ever since the war began, Archie had been longing for his Regiment to be sent to the front. Lord Douglas, too, fully recognizing the risks, had felt it almost as a slur that Archie had not yet been sent. His feelings were divided between natural regret and anxiety, on the one hand, and satisfaction that the time had come, on the other. So he wore his ordinary expression of grave distinction. The gentle Lady Douglas was frankly a mother who had to take leave of her son.

When they reached the quay at Southampton, and a thousand and twenty-four fighting men, with their sweethearts and relatives, were standing about in little knots, awaiting embarkation, those of his brother-officers who haunted the stalls of the *Babylon Theatre* were at odd moments interested to see that Archie's cousin, the beautiful leading lady in "Mary, Queen of Scots," who secluded herself from admirers so religiously, had come down with his parents to see him off. Her footing with the family was obvious; they were prepared now to admit the wisdom of her exclusiveness.

A few of those who were chosen to look after the entraining and embarkation because they had no one to see them off, and had met Mirabel at Lady Douglas's, came up and said: "How do you do?" to her, while they were waiting for the hooter to give the signal for the heavy job of embarking the Regiment. But it was only a "How do you do?" for Mirabel, as they expected, turned back to Archie almost immediately, and they had their men to look after.

Mirabel could not have believed that so many men and horses and wagons could have been got on board the transports so quickly. It seemed only a short half-hour instead of two hours before the hoarse whistles of the steamers snorted the "All aboard!" and the minute had come for Archie to say good-bye. He and his father said good-bye smilingly, remembering little things. His mother, when he kissed her as if he was still a child, wept quiet tears, and had no voice. But he was the old Archie when he slipped his arm round Paula's waist in pure mischief, and found her a willing victim, before he took his passionate farewell of Mirabel—his first and last kisses to the woman whom he had loved so devotedly and so chivalrously.

Though she had never yielded to her feelings before, she felt as if she had been his wife ever since that night when he forced his way into her dressing-room, and left it so gracefully. She clung to him and clung to him, till Lord Douglas gently separated them, saying, "Time's up, Archie ! God bless you and bring you safe home, when England's won ! "

The Douglas, Scotland's most historical peer, always spoke of the United Kingdom as England.

With one more long-drawn kiss Archie was on the gangway, by which they had been standing, walking across it with the buoyant, manly tread, which showed that he was, above all things, a soldier for whom the bugle had sounded.

But as the ship headed for France, and the band thundered out "Scotland for Ever," Mirabel's heart failed her.

CHAPTER XLV

"A DOUGLAS ! A DOUGLAS ! "

HOW ARCHIE FELL

THE Château of Villeneuve had resisted the fire of the British Artillery because it happened to stand behind the church, a thirteenth-century building, which, when once its roof had fallen in, and its floor had been torn up, seemed to defy further destruction by shell-fire. The glass had almost disappeared from the windows, but the thick walls, shored up by tremendous buttresses, could not be shifted from the perpendicular, and there was the miracle of the great Crucifix hanging in the Rood Chapel absolutely uninjured.

The château garden was divided from the graveyard round the church by a thick, high, loopholed wall, and the château itself was a low building, with thick walls and small windows, flanked at each end by a small round tourelle, with a low steeple—a terrible place to storm when it had been strengthened by Germans with every artifice of modern warfare.

As it was a strong point in the German defence, and was as difficult to reduce by assault as it was by gunfire, it was decided to mine it. A sap-head was made behind the church unperceived, and a mine was driven under it and the graveyard, which was to be continued under the garden wall and

the garden, to right beneath the château cellars, where it was to be exploded.

The British had to go down very deep to get under the foundations of the church. It was a piece of good fortune, for when they were continuing the sap under the graveyard, they heard the movements and footsteps of Germans just above them, the measured thump, thump.

They could not understand why the Germans should be driving a mine under the churchyard, unless it was to counter-mine them. In point of fact, they were not doing so. They were merely digging graves, using the graveyard for its original purpose, though it almost resulted in the British mine being fired and destroying only a few grave-diggers. But it did not take Captain Chaster, the R.E. officer in charge, an instant to decide to accept the risk of being blown into eternity with his Sappers, on the off-chance of succeeding in blowing up the château ; so they mined ahead with the utmost deliberation and caution. The picks could no longer be used and even the spades had to be handled as silently as possible. The grave-diggers, not being engineers by profession, providentially did not recognize that the sounds which they heard were made by the British mining. The R.E. only discovered what they were doing by twice coming across the body of a recently buried German—the stench told how recently.

Now it happened that the garden wall of the château had been the outer wall of a castle which had stood there before the château, and it, too, had deep and strong foundations, like a house, to impede the mining operations of the Middle Ages. When they reached these foundations, Chaster thought that they had reached the château, and when they had mined a few yards further, so as to be under its centre, as he believed, he telephoned to Brigade Headquarters, to ask that the detachment of the Scots Guards, who were to bomb and bayonet their way through when he had fired the mine, might be in readiness.

The mine, instead of ending under the château, ended under the middle of a maze of trenches, which filled the entire space between the château and its garden-wall, which had once been filled with lovers' walks and Provence roses.

At last the R.E. decided that the work of so many days and nights was ready, that the time had come for him to

destroy the masterpiece to which he had been giving all his brains, all his energies, every thought, every waking moment. He telephoned to the Brigade Headquarters again, and a high officer came to inspect.

He examined the mine, ordered the Guardsmen to be ready to make the rush as soon as the explosion cleared the way. Then he gave word to Chaster, who had placed and linked up all his charges, and connected them with the switch outside.

The R.E. scrambled out of his sap, a clay-caked figure, blinded by the daylight, and fired the mine.

In an instant he was caught in an earthquake. The solid ground heaved like the swell of the sea, rocked like a falling steeple, and shook to the roaring blast of the explosion. The shock and rush of air from the mine flung Chaster headlong. For a second he was stunned. The shower of stones and clods revived him with sharp pain. The twilight had gone back to night.

Even in that stunned condition, he knew by instinct that he had missed his objective, because though the explosion threw up masses of earth, hundreds of tons in weight, there was no concussion such as there would have been with the upheaval of the immense mediæval masonry of the château.

Before the vibration of the explosion had died away, before the last of the blown-up fragments had fallen, with a full, deep-chested roar of cheering the Guards dashed round the church, and swarmed over the disrupted masses of the château wall and the craters made in the garden by the linked-up charges of the mine.

They were no nice judges of sound and vibration, like the R.E. captain. They expected to finish in the château, with its centre blown out and fire being rained down on them with rifle, machine-gun, and bomb, from every part of the building which was still standing.

Archie was one of the officers in command of the assaulting party, who, followed by their men, flung themselves over the blown-up wall and the mine craters and scrambled up the further side of it, before the machine-guns in the upper parts of the château could be brought to bear on them. For a while it was impossible for the defenders to see them clearly, for the twilight of dawn had not cleared away, and the mine had sent up a tremendous cloud of dust and stones and dirt.

The Guards only just escaped another deadly peril, for when they had scrambled up to the crests of the cavities made by the explosion, they found themselves surrounded by the trenches of a redoubt, which were packed with German infantry, and, standing as they did against the sky-line, they expected to be shot at sight, especially the officers, easily recognizable at close quarters, and always picked off by German sharpshooters detailed for the purpose.

But the men in the trenches did not fire at them. They were groping about, as if it was still night, feeling for each other's faces and arms. The awful force of the explosion, right in their midst, had blinded and deafened them, and almost deprived them of their senses.

Without understanding why they were not fired at, the bayoneters leaped down among them, while the bombers flung their bombs at the first floor of the château which loomed up in front of them obscurely.

As soon as the dust cleared away all the British officers except one were picked off by the snipers in the château. The one who bore the charmed life was Archie. Those who had only seen him at home, looking such a boy, those who had only seen him in scenes like that dinner at the *Babylon*, "ragging" with the beauties of the Chorus, could not have recognized him in the fierce soldier who led the six-foot Scotsmen in the tremendous bayoneting, the hand-to-hand shooting which killed with flame as well as bullet, the crunching thud of rifle-butts. The sides of the trenches flaked and fell to pieces, as the machine-guns, fired from the château, beat on them like the spray of a cyclone, and cut even the earth to ribbons. In their anxiety to beat off the attack of the British, the Germans in the château poured a cataract of bullets into the trenches, regardless whether they mowed down friend or foe. The trenches were soon slippery with streams of blood, and choked and almost impassable with the slashed-up bodies of the dead.

But the Guards, led by Archie, fought on in their fine and irresistible way, until every German in the trenches was dead.

That was only the beginning. No one had expected any trenches, and not a man had reached the château yet.

Archie, boy as he was, and mad with the lust of fighting, had in his veins the blood of all the Douglases, who had led the armies of Scotland against England. He had the coolness

and leadership to look for a place which his cricketer's eye told him was out of the radius of the machine-guns. The only safe spots were right against the wall of the château, which could be reached by his men from the breaches in the trenches made by the explosion. The door of the château was guarded by machine-guns, as he detected by the holes knocked through the steps which led up to it. The regular communication-trenches, which led back to the château, had machine-guns trained on them from other cellars. But the breaches were unforeseen, and Archie had the leadership to perceive this. Right and left of the entrance his men rushed up to the walls of the château, and stood there, out of the reach of the machine-guns. The turrets at each end of the château did not project sufficiently to enfilade them.

There they halted to breathe before they tried to storm the château. How it was to be done no one could see, unless the Sappers, creeping up through the trenches with high explosives, could breach the château. But the trenches were so dominated by the fire from the upper windows that the feat seemed impossible.

The German commander came to their rescue. To enfilade the Guards sheltering against its walls, he ordered machine-guns to be taken out through the doors of the château. But the men detailed to do it were not quick enough.

Archie, who was nearest the door on the left side, heard the door opening, and calling out to the men on the right side to support him, hurled himself and the men with him on the emerging Germans, who, cumbered with machine-guns, tripods and belts, were overwhelmed by the onslaught, and bayoneted on the spot, or dashed back into the château followed hot-foot by the British.

The Germans dashed up the stairs, but the youthful heir of the Douglases kept his coolness, in spite of the fierce and breathless struggle in which he had just been engaged, and instead of trying to force the staircase, which was certain to be swept by rifle-fire and machine-guns, sent his men into the ground-floor rooms right and left of the door to bayonet the snipers and machine-gunners who were sheltered in them, and thus prepare the way for more British to come up. Reinforcements were already arriving, but, dashing for the open doorway, were mown down by the machine-guns through the holes in the steps below it.

Then two of Archie's men volunteered to make their way back through the desolated trenches, and tell the reinforcements to take the same route as they had taken.

While they were gone, the British on the ground floor entrenched themselves with the sandbags which they found guarding the windows, hastily transferred to the doors, against the Germans, who were much more numerous, on the first floor and the machine-gunners in the cellar.

By this time there was a fresh element in favour of the British, for the reinforcements had made a rude parapet by piling up sandbags between the shattered masses of the garden wall, and lined it with machine-guns with which they played on the windows of the château's upper floors, thus creating a diversion.

But this did not satisfy Archie. Not content with holding the ground floor, he ordered the men on his side of the hall to fire up through the ceiling. With their high-velocity rifles they soon knocked it to pieces, and riddled the floor above. The great masses of plaster coming down killed some and maimed others, but they did not care. The men could see the ceiling giving way, and they knew that if they went on, the Germans on the floor above, machine-guns and all, would come down through it.

Not losing his head with the success of his plan, Archie made his men stand as close to the walls as they could, when the floor above began to drop through. But it was too much for them when the top-booted legs of a Boche came down through the ceiling, which was not a high one, and which was now not only smashed through by the terrible force of the rifles, but actually set on fire by the flame from their muzzles. Two big Guardsmen made a dash for the Boche's legs, and, using their weight below, established a leverage which no holding up from above could resist. He was run through with a bayonet before he reached the ground, and the efforts of his comrades to save him brought half a dozen of them tumbling through the floor after him, and their fall brought down the whole floor, with every man and gun on it.

Many British were felled by the falling débris and guns. But the Germans who fell, however brave they were, and however lucky in having escaped injury, were at a hopeless disadvantage against the British, ranged against the walls

to escape the débris, especially since Archie had ordered them to stand clear and shoot. The numbers of the Germans availed them nothing with such a handicap.

Nor did the carnage end there, for the immense weight falling on the floor crashed through it and into the cellars.

The British who were not killed or disabled by the collapse of the floors, at once began firing on the machine-gunners in the cellars, who were an easy prey as there were only enough of them to man the machine-guns, and they had not their rifles handy to reply.

When the Germans whom they could see in the cellars were sufficiently cleared out, Archie ordered his men to cease firing, and twenty volunteers scrambled down the débris to fight their way through, and bayonet the machine-gunners in the cellars under the steps and in the other wing, the work of a few red minutes. The door being no longer swept by machine-guns, the leading company of a wild Irish regiment, coming up in support, dashed in through the machine-gun and rifle-fire from the upper story of the other wing, and, unheeding its losses, swept up the great staircase, and cleaned out the other wing with its bayonets, and all was over.

All except one thing. When all firing had ceased, and the victors came out in batches to revive themselves in the air of the mine-torn garden, while they were fortifying the far side of the château against the counter-attack, which must inevitably come, a sniper, who had been overlooked, shot that true descendant of the Black Douglas, the twenty-year-old subaltern who had stormed the château with his swift perceptions and iron courage, through the lungs, and he fell, a doomed man.

" With that there came an arrow hastilie,
Forth of a mighty wane,
It hath stricken the Earl Douglas
In at the breast-bane.

" Through liver and lungs both
The sharp arrow is gane,
That never after in all his life days
He spake no words but ane,
That was, ' Fight ye, my merry men, whiles ye may,
For my life days ben gane.' "

From *The Ballad of Chevy Chace*.

CHAPTER XLVI

HOW CAPTAIN O'NEILL FURTHERED ARCHIE'S LAST REQUEST

THE Irishmen had been headed in their rush up the stairs of the château by a Captain nearly fifty years old, who had been a Captain when he left the Regiment ten years before, after the Boer War, and had been rejoiced to go back to it with the same rank. It was Desmond O'Neill. The great boxer, being a man of exceptional physique, who had always kept himself in good trim, was able to stand the hardships of the trenches better than many youngsters.

His record as Champion of the Army made him a hero with the Regiment, so the Colonel had gladly given *his* company the honour of heading the rush to support the Guards. And Desmond's men, with Desmond at their head, armed with rifle and bayonet like themselves, had been irresistible.

Desmond was cleaning his bayonet, and showing his strength at the same time, by driving it into the hard ground up to its hilt, as if the earth had been a sheet of notepaper, when a stretcher-bearer came up to him, and, saluting, said that there was a badly-wounded Guards' officer who wanted to speak to another officer. He hastily went along with the man, and found to his horror that it was Archie, suffering from a spasm of coughing terrible in his dying condition, and which could not be stopped until he spat up the blood in his lungs which caused it.

"I hope that you're not badly hurt, Avondale," he said, though he saw by the pallor of the face, which had been so beautifully ruddy, that there could not be much hope.

"Thanks, old chap. I'm afraid that I have to pass in my checks. No, I'm damned if I'm afraid! I've never been afraid since that night when you—you know . . . it was the night I fell in love with Mirry."

"I know, Avondale, and to think that it has come to this! Do you want me to take a message for her?"

Slowly, broken by frequent fits of coughing, came Archie's answer:

"No—I mean, yes, in case of accidents. Tell her, in case

I don't get to him, that my last thoughts were of her. But, for God's sake, if you can, get me to Gray!"

"Gray?" said Desmond. "Where is he?"

"I saw him yesterday morning as we were coming along. He was observing in the front Infantry trench at Givinchy.* I passed the time of day to him as he was going into his Observation Post, and I want to speak to him again before I go out."

"Of course I'll get you to him, Avondale. Only don't talk of 'going out'! There's a chap been fighting by my side to-day who has had a bullet through his brain, and is quite well again. He got through to-day all right, too."

"It's no good telling me, O'Neill. I shall never see Mirry again, but I mean to see Gray, if you'll help me. I've got something to say to him about Mirry, and I know I shall never rest in my grave if I don't say it."

"Well, I'll get you there, if I have to ask for leave and carry you myself. Hi—you, Orderly—Captain O'Neill's compliments to your commanding officer, and ask him if I can have a stretcher-party to take a wounded officer, Lord Avondale of the Scots Guards, down to the Givinchy trenches, where he has a relative." Desmond had not the least idea how near the truth he was. He added under his breath: "You see the condition he's in."

Though Archie was mortally wounded, it was plain that he still had the command of his faculties as well as his powers of speech, because he said in a queer voice: "It would be rather a wheeze if you carried me in my *exit* as well as my *entry*!"

"We shan't let it be your *exit* if we can help it, old man! They have a Field Hospital just behind the lines there."

"They've got me all right! But I don't mean to make my bow till I have spoken to Gray, if I can help it."

As he finished these words, he was interrupted by a spasm of coughing and blood-spitting, followed by a faint. Desmond feared that the end had come, and was beside himself because he did not know what to do to stave off death till the stretcher-party arrived—they would know what to do. But at length Archie opened his eyes again, and Desmond said: "Does it hurt terribly?"

* Pronounced by our soldiers Givinchy, but written Givenchy.

"Not the wound—it's what I have to say to Gray; he's a good chap."

"He'll let you say what you like; he's one of the best."

At that moment the stretcher-party came up.

The corporal saluted. "Captain Carruthers' compliments, sir, and we are to ask you for orders."

"Ask for Lieutenant Gray, R.G.A., at the Siege Artillery Observation Post in the front trench at Givinchy. Lord Avondale has a message for him."

The corporal already knew Lord Avondale well by sight. All the Guards' Regiments have performed such miracles of self-sacrificing valour that they have filled the hospitals.

"I'll do my best, sir," said the corporal, as he hastily effected in the way of first aid what the nature of the injury required; he could see that the wound was mortal. But, though he shook his head as he did it, he placed an anti-septic pad over the entrance wound, and secured it in its place with a bandage.

"Make them promise to take me to him, dead or alive," said Archie, "and then I can close my eyes, if it eases me."

"I give you my word on it, my Lord," said the corporal.

"I'm 'my Lord' again!" said Archie. "It's like the old times at the theatre! Good-bye, O'Neill—I'm afraid that it's the Last Post!"

The man who half an hour before had been like a devil out of hell, as he tore up the staircase with his Munsters, had his eyes full of tears as he grasped Archie's hand in a firm, gentle grip.

"I'll write to your people and Mirry." He said "Murry," because he knew that it would be music to Archie's ears. "Ask for Lieutenant Gray, Corporal."

When the bearers, moving as carefully as they could, had disappeared in the sap, Captain O'Neill went to the other side of the château, and did the work of three men in altering the trenches against the counter-attack.

One of Archie's men, who had been his servant, stalked the sniper who had shot their officer in cold blood when it was all over. The man, when the Guardsman sprang upon him too suddenly for him to shoot, cried for mercy.

The Scot, who had dropped his rifle to spring on him, dragged him by the collar to the château, to decide what should be done with him. He shook him like a rat all the way, big man though he was, and bumped and battered

him over the waves of heaps and holes, of smashed-up masonry, of broken beams and jagged planks, of wrecked trenches and barricading, of bulged helmets and broken rifles, of the bloody hashed-up débris of the dead and their belongings. A runaway horse could hardly have smashed him more horribly. Before he got to the château the sniper was an obliterated body with the life shaken out of it. The Guardsman threw it on the spot where Archie fell and went back to fetch his rifle.

CHAPTER XLVII

HOW ARCHIE LEARNED MIRABEL'S SECRET

ON the morning after the storming of the château, Gray, who, since they were expecting an attack, had remained in the Observation Post all night, was about to step out of the basement, below the half-destroyed room in the battered-down house where he had been observing, behind a rampart of sandbags, when his way was barred by a stretcher carrying a tall young Guards' officer, which its bearers had set down just by the broken doorway. The corporal had his foot on the threshold as Gray was coming out. Gray had seen many men die since he had landed in France, and one glance told him that the bleeding figure before him had only a span to live. A second glance. . . . Good God! it was Archie!

" Lieutenant Gray? " said the corporal.

" Yes? "

" May I bring him in, sir? He has something to say to you, sir."

" Quick, quick! " cried Gray. " And one of you go and find the medical officer in the trench! " He dreaded lest the message should be lost.

" He won't die till he has said it, sir, " said the corporal, while the men brought him in as swiftly as they could without giving him unnecessary shaking. " I thought he was dead once as we were bringing him along, but when I turned him over, he told me almost in his natural voice—I know him, sir, he's Lord Avondale—how to get to you, saying, ' I must speak to him before I go out.' He's just living for that. I've seen others that way, and they generally last till they've done it."

He stopped speaking. The men had got the stretcher in through the broken doorway, and lowered it reverently. The corporal made a sign, and they went out. He himself stayed to wipe the mouth of the fainting man, and moisten his lips with diluted brandy from time to time.

The boy was much worse now, and his life was ebbing fast. Intent as he was on not losing a sound or a symptom of the dying man, Gray kept glancing round to see if medical aid was coming, but there was no sign, and it seemed as if, after all, Archie would not recover sufficiently to give his message before he died.

But when Gray had given up all hope, the stimulant at last began to tell, and Archie pulled himself together sufficiently to recognize the man he had made such a supreme effort to see before he left the earth.

"Gray," he said in a feeble voice.

"Oh, Archie!" he cried, throwing himself on his knees beside him, with tears welling out of his eyes—"don't die, old man!"

"Number's up," said Archie, with a last flicker of his gay old self. Then, getting more voice by sheer will-power, he said: "Don't blub, Gray; it makes it so hard for me to say it. . . ."

"What, old man?"

"Bend low—I don't want that chap to hear."

Gray bent still lower over him, and Archie gasped out: "Say that you're nothing to Mirry."

"I can't say that," replied Gray, in a low voice.

The look of agony, almost of fierceness, which wrung Archie's face, startled him. Unless he did something, it meant the end. Was his promise to Mirabel to kill Archie? Surely not, for Archie must carry it to the grave with him, unless the corporal overheard it.

"Archie, dear old man," he said, "you can go to sleep comfortably. I am her husband, and was before ever you saw her. I made her marry me, but she only did it on condition that . . ."

He stopped suddenly, as he saw that the rest of the words would be lost on Archie, who had fallen back in a state of collapse, which showed only too plainly that death was imminent, now that he had fulfilled his mission. But there was one more flicker.

" Married ? Then here goes ! . . . Give her my love and my ring. . . . Bless you both. . . . So long ! "

" Help ! help !" cried Gray, springing to his feet, and the corporal rushed forward. No medical officer had been found, but the corporal knew sufficient.

" It's no use, sir—he's 'gone west.' "

" Oh, my God, it's wicked to think of him dead !" moaned Gray, taking the boy's hand in a clasp of good-bye and pressing his lips on the damp forehead.

" They might have took him last," said the corporal. " He's so young, and with that face—some woman will be breaking her heart. . . ."

" I know her," said Gray, " and if you'll give me the things he's got about him, I'll send them to her."

" Yes, sir."

" I'll take the ring on his finger now," he said, bending down to draw it off. He looked at the crest, which had *Pro patria* above it, and *Jamais arrière* below. " He's lived up to his mottoes," he said.

The corporal did not understand him, but said : " Yes, sir," and a little afterwards : " You know the lady, you say, sir ? "

" Yes," said Gray.

" Just to think how happy they might have lived together if he'd been spared !" said the man, genuinely affected.

Gray shut his eyes, but his face showed the torture he was suffering.

" I feels like you, sir."

" You can't, my man, and I hope you never may."

The man had a sense of discipline, but none of humour. He said, " Very well, sir," exactly as if he were taking an order.

The futility of it brought Gray back to realities. " What did he die of ? " he asked.

" Shot through the lungs, sir."

" Could he have lived if he had been picked up sooner ? "

" We was sent for as soon as he was hit, sir. A sniper did it after the affair was over."

" A sniper, when it was over ? Damn him !" said Gray.

" I hope they got him, and wrung his neck ! "

Gray spent that night in going to Archie's funeral, instead of taking his much-needed sleep. It was pitch-dark, and no

salutes are fired at the front, lest they should give away the position to enemy aeroplanes. Gray brought a neat wooden cross, made by the wheeler of the Battery, on which he got the man to burn with a hot iron :

R.I.P. Archie, Viscount Avondale,
Master of Douglas.

Outside their billet on his return he met Worboys. " Hallo, you naughty man, where have you been all night ? " asked the irrepressible.

" I've been to the funeral of Mirabel's cousin, who got killed in the fight yesterday."

" Beg pardon, old man. You know how awfully sorry I am to have made such a blunder."

" Oh, of course ! It's just what he would have done himself, poor boy."

" Was Mirabel . . . was Miss Douglas fond of him ? " asked Worboys.

" Terribly ! " said Gray, and turned quickly away. Was everyone to put his finger on this aching spot ?

The very air of France seemed to know how his wife had told him that she loved Archie. He would have felt that Archie's blood was on his head, if he had not mourned for Archie so passionately himself.

CHAPTER XLVIII

HOW MIRABEL BROKE THE NEWS OF ARCHIE'S DEATH TO HIS PARENTS

" The Douglas turned towards us then,
Oh, but his glance was high ! "

W. E. AYTOUN.—*The Heart of the Bruce.*

WHEN Mirabel heard of Archie's death, she felt as if the sun had fallen out of the sky. Archie under the earth ! the beautiful Archie blotted out ! the restless Archie at rest ! the irrepressible Archie for ever silent, and lying, like so many of his ancestors before him, with a stricken body under the turf of battle ! The thought was too appalling. She would not, could not, did not, believe her senses.

Gray, always considerate, had wired to her to break the news to Lord and Lady Douglas, if she could, before the official telegram reached them.

She motored swiftly down to the little Sussex town, whose big race-course and training-stables had been turned into a vast Army Remount Depot, with Lord Douglas at its head.

The Government had allowed him to establish the depot there, because he had a house, an oldish country house, there, adjoining his former racing stables, and knew how to lay his hand on the men he required for the horses.

Lord Douglas had not visited it since he gave up racing, when his jockey had pulled a horse which was winning in a big race, and involved the stable in a scandal. Outside, with the exception of one flank, it had been disfigured with pretentious stucco by the late Lord's architect ; but inside it was a dear old house, with dark, mellow Jacobean paneling and staircases, which, perhaps fortunately, bore the appearance of neglect.

It was poorly furnished, and contained nothing of interest but its paneling, and racing pictures connected with the Douglas stables, which had been left there because Lord Douglas desired to forget that he ever had raced. Another trainer had leased the dower-house and park and stables, but he, too, had left since the beginning of the war.

The whole house was desolate with desertion, but Mirabel looked at it with a melancholy interest, because this would, according to Paula, be the house of "the elderly relative," since Lord Douglas had no other seat in the South.

He was on horseback in one of the paddocks, inspecting a fresh draft of horses, when a lad came out, saying : "Miss Douglas has arrived, my Lord."

" My compliments to Miss Douglas, and tell her that I will be with her when I have given some orders—in a quarter of an hour at the outside."

Mirabel had been shown into the library, which had never possessed any books, except a small collection of turf calendars and other works on racing, but had really been the office then, as it was now. It had the finest paneling in the house, but, except for one square yard, it was entirely covered up with lithographs and oil-paintings of the stables' winners. The portrait of the horse which had not been allowed to win its last race had hung where the gap was left,

One glance at that room was enough for the future owner. She went to the window and stared out on the cheerless day, till presently she heard the sound of hoofs on the drive, and saw her cousin riding up in a Colonel's uniform, with the badges of his old Regiment, the Scots Greys.

He looked almost too young and alert not to be in France, for it had taken years off his appearance to be in uniform, and in the saddle all day, and frequently mounting the horses which were brought to him for purchase, to test them.

With a heart like a stone she saw him clatter up proud and erect, and spring from his horse, which the groom was waiting to take. He dashed up the steps two at a time ; it was Mirabel—Mirabel ! She was wishing herself in Archie's place ; it was such a dreadful task which she had before her. He could not have heard ! She was, indeed, the only one who had heard, thanks to Gray, who got his message across by one of the wounded going straight through to England. He sent two telegrams ; the first ran :

"MISS DOUGLAS, Bolingbroke House, Chiswick.—Be prepared for bad news about Archie.—OLIVER."

And the second, to be despatched an hour afterwards :

"Archie killed in storming a German position."

Mirabel decided that she must tell them in person. Even with the warning telegram in advance, she was so stricken herself, that she felt that *she* must break it to them ; they must not hear it from any other lips. She meant to see Lord Douglas first, because she could rely on him to be able to refrain from telegraphing to Lady Douglas.

Thus it was that she found herself in that dismal, half-inhabited house, under the Sussex Downs, waiting to deal that gallant veteran a murderous blow as soon as he had stepped inside the door.

He came forward briskly, in his gladness at the unexpected visit. Then their eyes met, and he knew that she had bad news.

"It's Archie !" he said.

She only sobbed and buried her face against his shoulder.

"He is killed !" Lord Douglas's eyes were dry, and he

spoke in a curiously dry voice, as if it was not himself, but only the husk of his body, with the soul taken out of it, which was speaking.

"Poor Archie!" she sighed.

"No . . . poor us! Archie has died for his country, as the Douglases do! And he is the first Douglas, of the senior branch, who has died for England. . . . We were none of us killed under Marlborough, or Wellington, or at the Crimea, or in any of our little wars. The motto of the house has lain dormant since the Union."

Yes—"poor us!" The man was the dead boy's father, and the woman had loved him, and had hoped against hope that she might some day be his wife.

Which of the two suffered most, the woman who had given her heart to this flower of manhood, or the man who saw the last of his name, the last of the family founded by the Bruce's brother-in-arms six stormy centuries ago, cut off before the rejoicings, which attended the coming to manhood of the heirs of the great Earls of Douglas, had lighted bonfires on the hills from Lanarkshire's mines to Dumfriesshire's moors? From a child Archie had carried his life in his hand, till it seemed as if he must be born to hand on the renown of his race. And now he had fallen—fallen in a fight which had not moved the final victory one inch forwards or backwards, which proved nothing except that, given a chance, the English Infantry were irresistible, and that England seemed to possess no generals capable of giving them chances.

It was so pitiful that the child of such hopes should have died before he had passed the threshold of manhood, as a subaltern leading a handful of Infantry in an isolated minor operation—brilliant as the exploit had been.

If anything could add poignancy to the loss of an only son, it was this.

But Lord Douglas bore his loss with Scottish fortitude. There was no outward change in him, except that the death added to his dignity, because it banished every other thought.

Every other thought but one: for the wife whose chatter and hospitalities had driven him from his town mansion to that hermitage beside the river.

When Lady Douglas received a telegram to say that her husband was coming home to stay for several days, she was

frightened with the subconsciousness of something stupendous having happened. Such a thing had not occurred for years ; especially since the telegram added that Mirabel, who had a house of her own in London, was coming to stay also.

Mirabel, on her part, had telegraphed to Old Mac that she could not appear for that night, at least, and as he knew that her word was law with Oliver Gray, Junior, he simply warned her understudy.

The question as to who should break the news they left over till Mirabel's car was taking them up to town. But it needed little time to decide who should tell Lady Douglas. It must be the lover of her youth, who had been her constant companion for so many years.

Planning how it could be done kept them almost in silence during the whole long drive up to town. Each turned over plan after plan. And every plan seemed useless in the case of one so accustomed to yield to her emotions.

When they reached the door of Lanarkshire House, they were still at the mercy of the moment. Grainger met them at the door, and while the footman helped Lord Douglas to take off his coat and brought in his luggage with silent expeditiousness, Grainger said in low tones to Mirabel : "Lord Avondale . . . has he gone, Miss ? Her Ladyship is breaking her heart in the small drawing-room ! "

"Then she has guessed it ? Nobody has told her, I suppose ? "

"Nobody, Miss. We have had nothing but his Lordship's telegram."

The moment she had received that, Lady Douglas had been seized with a spasm of silent tears, and had gone on weeping without one word from that moment to this.

Mirabel told Lord Douglas.

"What can we do ? " he asked.

"Nothing . . . I don't know . . . I mean, you must just go to her, and you must do your best when you hear what she says. I'll wait ; I have to give my chauffeur orders about fetching the things for which I sent that 'phone from Horsham."

"I suppose that's best. Grainger, tell Miss Douglas's chauffeur that she wants him, will you ? "

"Yes, my Lord," he said, taking it for a signal that Lord Douglas did not wish to be announced.

When The Douglas entered the room he found Lady Douglas sitting in an upright chair in front of the fire, with bowed head. He stood there in silence for a minute. He heard a tear fall on the hearth, which told him more than many words ; for she was so stricken with grief that she neither moved nor noticed his presence. She did not even raise her head when he called her by name.

"Janet," he said, a second time, in a low voice.

And she raised a face so worn with weeping that he hardly knew it.

"You need not tell me," she said. "I know it already—I have lost Archie."

"Yes, dear Janet," he said, "for the first time for twenty years we are without a child."

She said nothing, but her pursed lips were more eloquent than words. He, too, was silent for a little ; then, with his beautiful courtesy, he prepared to leave the room, just waiting for her to look up, so that he might not have to break the silence.

Then at last she spoke : "Yes, Jim, I do want to be alone for to-night. But come and let me kiss you, dear. Nothing you have ever done, in all your kind life, has gone to my heart like your coming to be at home now."

He went over to her, and then slipped out of the room, and was just slipping out of the house when Grainger saw him, and said : "Your hat and coat, my Lord."

"Oh, yes," he said, "give them to me." He was going out without them, not thinking of such matters, rather than purposely avoiding them.

He went into the Park ; there was a gate nearly opposite his house, which was always open, for the traffic to the Great Western station. He passed in, and on to the wide plain where anarchists hold their meetings. If Archie had died in any other way, he would have felt like an anarchist against high Heaven.

Now he wished to think, and it seemed to him that any place which had a roof between him and the sky would be intolerable.

When he came in he found Mirabel still up. She had not seen Lady Douglas, and he could frame no words but good night.

There were three very lonely hearts in the House of The Douglas that night.

CHAPTER XLIX

LORD DOUGLAS LEARNS MIRABEL'S SECRET

MIRABEL had black dresses, and would not let Madame Vendome intrude upon her misery until the sorrowful week at Lanarkshire House was passed. Her maid could make the necessary alterations until she ordered her mourning.

But after the first night she went to the theatre and played her part, and was the object of great but silent interest. Even Betty Farnol felt what she was going to say die away upon her lips.

They all knew what had happened : the illustrated papers saw to that. Paula might have made a month or two's income out of biographies of Mirabel, if she had felt free to do so, for she was besieged with offers from Fleet Street, and representatives from "The Daily Mirror" and "The Daily Sketch" and their weeklies sent in their cards to her, when they found that Mirabel was away. Failing everything else, they photographed the front of the house. Jeffreys had unconsciously given them one paragraph, when he informed them, not for their benefit at all, but as a piece of gratuitous insolence, that she had gone to Lanarkshire House on purpose to avoid them. They had horrible paragraphs—not meant to be horrible, but merely to feed the inquisitiveness of the public—about the new heir taking up her residence with the parents of the deceased Lord Avondale, generally ending with the assumption that she would give up her position at the *Babylon* at once.

She was glad now that she had never made friends with anybody in the Company, since no one at the theatre knew her well enough to discuss her affairs with her. It was not that they did not try after the first night or two ; theatrical people are most inquisitive about each other's affairs, and, except where an intrigue is concerned, very open about their own. The *modus operandi* was generally the same : first

they congratulated her, and then they began to ask questions. She accepted their congratulations courteously, and damped their hopes of succeeding to her place by saying that it made no difference to her plans professionally. Beyond that she simply parried their questions, and as her dressing-room was right away from theirs, and she had never made anyone welcome to it, they wormed little out of her.

On the last morning of her stay with her cousins, she was having breakfast with Lord Douglas alone, at his usual daylight-saving hour, when he said : " I should like to have a talk with you after breakfast, Mirry."

" All right," she said. " Where shall we have it ? "

He suggested that they should go and find a seat in the palm-garden, which played such a conspicuous part in Lady Douglas's receptions. It was sunny, and out of the way of the servants.

Lady Douglas did not have breakfast sent up to her room till ten. By this time she was recovering herself, and leaning very much on Mirabel, so that it would have been difficult to get an hour alone at any other time.

" I want to have a serious talk with you, Mirry," he said, when they had seated themselves.

" I hope you've nothing to scold me about, Jim ? " she said affectionately.

" Oh, no, dear ! But you're going home to-day, and before you left, I thought I ought to remind you that you are now my heir, and that when I am gone you are the last of our Douglases left to carry on the succession. You know, probably, that ours is one of the old titles by estate, and can therefore be inherited by a woman ? "

" I know that, because I have been down as second heir in the peerages."

" You may think that this is a subject which need not have been raised yet, but it really is none too soon to warn you of your dangers and responsibilities. When I die, Mirabel, you will be Countess of Douglas in your own right and inherit great wealth. So it is important that you should not make a foolish marriage. It is likewise of immediate importance that you should marry, because you are the last of the heirs of the Black Douglas, who founded our line, the senior line of the Douglas family, and if you as well as I die without issue, the family will be at an end, and the

estates will revert to His Majesty as King of Scotland, since they were forfeited by the 9th Earl and re-granted to the 10th.

"I mention the first to you because all sorts of undesirable people, especially the men who act with you, or the Johnnies who haunt the theatre, will make a dead-set at marrying you, now that they know of the change in your circumstances, and the second, because I think that with your permission I ought to introduce to you the most suitable and eligible members of Scottish families—they need not in your case be eldest sons—until you find one upon whom your choice can fall."

"And, in the third place, now that you are direct heir to the Earldom of Douglas, you ought certainly to give up your position at the theatre without delay."

"My dear Jim, at any less serious time I should have refused to discuss the subject. As it is, I will go into it briefly and seriously with you. In the third place, I cannot leave the theatre, because I have signed a contract for ten years."

"That's quite simple, Mirry. I know something about theatrical contracts. If you refuse to go on with it because you want to marry and leave the stage, it is simply a question of damages. I don't believe that a decent fellow like Gray would press for them, but if he does, the Douglas estates must pay."

"But I'm the person who would have to break the contract, and I should refuse to do it, because I consider that it would be dishonourable to do so, and defraud my benefactor."

"I agree that if you think it dishonourable to try and get out of the contract, the matter is at an end in that direction."

"Secondly, there is not the least likelihood that I should accept any designing actor or hanger-on at the theatre."

"And, firstly, I have a very particular reason for not allowing you to select eligible husbands for me, which I will tell you on your oath that you will not reveal it to anyone—not even Janet. Will you give me your solemn word and oath, Jim?"

"Of course I will! Here's my hand on it."

"Well, the reason I can't let you choose a husband for me is because I am married already."

"Married, Mirry?" he said, springing from his seat in his astonishment.

"Yes, married, and have been for about two years."

"I think that as head of the family I have a right to ask who your husband is."

"You may have the right, but I can't tell you unless you promise never to communicate with him, by yourself or through others, by writing or by word of mouth, until I give you my permission."

"I promise."

"Then you must know that I am married to John Gray, commonly known as 'Oliver Gray, Junior,' proprietor and manager of the *Babylon Theatre*."

"Then all I can say is that Master Gray knew pretty well what he was about when he made you leading lady at the *Babylon*, and persuaded you to marry him in honour of it."

"I assure you that he did not. He had not any idea who I was until poor Archie came upon the scene. You must remember that to the world I am Mirabel Douglas, and my contract is made out in the name of Mirabel Douglas, while in the peerage I am Isabel and supposed to live in Italy. Besides, at the time when I married him there was no war, and every prospect of a healthy, vigorous young man like Archie having a family."

"Oh, don't!"

"I'm sorry, Jim. I was seeing with Oliver's eyes."

"I don't see any reason why he should want to keep the marriage a secret."

"You don't know the story. Listen! Until I came, Oliver's leading ladies had always been his mistresses. He made it a condition—you must remember that he was young, not long down from Oxford—and the bait was too dazzling to refuse.

"Well, when I had been about a year at the Royal Lyceum of Music, I saw an advertisement in all the papers inviting applicants for the post of leading lady in the new musical comedy to be produced at the *Babylon*."

"Which was his way of making hundreds of especially charming women parade before him, with a view to selection for a certain purpose."

"I am afraid that it was so; that is part of our quarrel. At the same time, he really wanted fresh blood in his Company, because he chose me, and he did not even hint at that degrading condition."

"He was flying at higher game when he found what a prize had come into his nets."

"I wasn't much of a prize. I was a student who had not got so far as applying for an engagement."

"But you might some day be Countess of Douglas."

"But that was too distant to contemplate on the one hand, and, as I have told you, no one, except the banker in Milan, through whom I drew my income from the Douglas estates, knew that I was Isabel Douglas. . . . On the other . . ."

"You think that is certain?"

"I do."

"I'm afraid that I don't; but proceed."

". . . Instead of insulting me as he had insulted the others, he did me the honour of proposing that I should marry him."

"Did he do you this honour before or after he had settled that you were the best recruit for his company?"

"After an elaborate examination of my accomplishments by Mr. Maccabaeus, who is his adviser about acting and singing, and Mr. Stradella, who trains and rehearses the dancing. That reduced us to about half a dozen."

"Was this genuine—this selection of half a dozen, or was it only part of a plot to catch you?"

"Genuine, I am sure. They were the women who were on the one hand sufficiently pleasing to him, and, on the other, the most promising candidates for the post."

"And he was going to choose the one he liked best, shall we say?"

"I am afraid that it is so."

"I am not going to blame him. He is not the only man who would use a pull like this. But I think that it's disgusting."

"You can't be as disgusted as I was! After all his kindness, I have not got over it yet."

"And did he in the first instance ask you to consent to this arrangement?"

"No, to do him justice, he didn't. His proposition for making me his slave was to marry me."

"A secret marriage! I don't see much difference!"

"The secret wasn't his idea. He would have liked to proclaim my capture to the world."

"And why didn't you let him? It was not a particularly distinguished match for a Douglas, but you might have kept your family a secret, and announced your marriage."

"Well, the whole thing was so hateful to me that, since he would not give me the part unless I married him, and was willing to accept any conditions I liked if I married him, in return for his making me leading lady of the *Babylon Theatre* for ten years at a proper salary, I agreed to marry him for a month."

"Marry him for a month! Is this England or Japan? I think it's the most disgraceful thing I ever heard of in my life!"

"Well, of course I married him for good—the law settles that; but I made him promise that he would allow me to give up living with him after one month, and would not divulge our marriage to anyone, or take any measures whatever to make me return to him."

"Any judge would upset that as contrary to public policy."

"Yes, but Oliver is a man of honour."

"The deuce he is!"

"I assure you that he is; he is the most honourable man—present company excepted—with whom I have ever had any dealings."

"I'm glad to hear that," he said. "I like Gray. But may I ask what, under the circumstances, is all the bother about? You've got a nice young husband, who is prepared to treat you awfully well, but you won't live with him, or let it be known that you are married, and you're bound to have all sorts of offers for your hand, now that you're my heir, and ought to be thinking of the succession! But this secret marriage blocks the way. How on earth could a clever man of business like Gray be party to such an arrangement?"

"Just because he had fallen so much in love with me that I believe he would have married me for a day, instead of a month, if I had held out. And, secondly, I suppose, because, being a man, and therefore a vain creature, he imagined that, given a month to win my affections, he would be able to make me live with him always."

"Oh, he's a decent chap! Go to him, Mirry, as soon as he gets back—if ever he does get back!"

"I wish I could, Jim, but I can't."

"Then I almost hope that he never will get back ; the whole thing is so false and bad."

For a moment a little ray shone out of the black clouds of Mirabel's depression, like the dayspring on the eastern horizon, but she blotted it out, and hated herself.

"Why can't you ?" he persisted.

"Must you know, Jim ?"

"As head of the family, I think I have a right to."

"You don't know how great a right you have !"

"Then tell me."

"I can never look you in the face again, if I do."

"I'm sure you can, Mirry, considering what you were willing to let me think before you made your confession to me just now."

"Oh, I can't, I can't !" she cried, the pallor of her grief giving way to a flush almost crimson.

He said nothing, but waited with profound sympathy. Presently she began to speak, very slowly, with her eyes glued to the ground.

"It's because of Archie," she said.

"Oh, not that !" he groaned. "I pray God in Heaven not that !"

"No, not that ! I never so much as kissed him till we said good-bye at Southampton. But, Jim, Archie and I, though we never gave our love to each other, loved each other like Jacob and Rachel in the Bible."

It was as natural for him to understand it as for her to say it, because they were Presbyterians, brought up on the Bible, though they had drifted from all observances. Archibald Douglas had seen no inconsistency in leading the life he led and being a regular supporter of the little Presbyterian chapel at Bellaggio.

"I know how Archie loved you. But surely, Mirry, since this was so, the chief obstacle to your happiness with Gray has been taken away. Our fathers would have read this as a dispensation."

"Our fathers might !" she cried fiercely. "But since this war began the world is upside down ! I can't see it like that. I wish I could. All that I can see in it—oh, Jim, can't you see ?" she asked, moving to him, and burying her face against his shoulder, as she had when she took him the fatal news.

" See ?—no. What, dear ? "

" That if it had not been for that accursed marriage I should have been Archie's widow, and about to be the mother of his child ! "

Then the full tragedy was before his eyes. If Gray had not forced Mirabel into that marriage, his beautiful Archie might not have been lost to the earth without leaving behind one to transmit those gracious qualities to future generations of the seed of the Iron-Grey Man.

In his passion of regret that Archie should have been robbed of descendants by this untoward barrier to his marriage, he gave not a thought to the tragedy that he, too, was robbed of descendants by that same sinister obstacle.

The Douglas put her from him gently. " I would have given all my possessions for this to have happened," he said. " But it isn't Gray's fault that you met him first, and if Gray did not know who you were, but took you for the ordinary musical student, and, besides marrying you honourably, gave you that splendid position in your profession, I don't see that he did you any wrong for which you cannot forgive him, especially seeing that he married you for love just as much as Archie would have done, and has shown up so well, since you have been married ! "

" My dear Jim, nothing can alter the fact that I have not Archie's child, and I should have, if it had not been for Oliver. This I shall never forgive ! "

CHAPTER L

HOW OLIVER GRAY, SINGLE-HANDED, SAVED A BRITISH TRENCH

O LIVER GRAY was in hospital at the base, and never would go to the front again, for his left leg had been bombed off, while he was saving the Infantry trench in which he had been observing, from a sudden rush by the Bavarians. The rush was most skilfully conceived and carried out, just at nightfall, when he was leaving his post for the day to return to his billet. The English in the trench, though taken quite by surprise, flattened the first attack with their rifle-fire. But a second and a third were

flung after it, and wiped out the defenders of the trench with their bombs before they wilted away.

The surprise was effected by throwing wooden gratings about a dozen feet long and four feet wide across the deep muddy ditch, which ran between the two front-line trenches, making the space between them a sort of no-man's land. These had been brought out from the German trench the night before, and buried a few inches below the surface on their side of the ditch, the turf having been removed so carefully that it could be replaced without showing, until one was actually walking on it.

They were left there until the next nightfall, when a strong force of infantry, lavishly supplied with bombs, rushed out in the dusk, and sweeping off the turf which had been laid on them, planted them firmly across the ditch, and charged over them against the British trench.

The parapet flamed and roared with gusts of rapid fire ; but the dusk robbed it of its effect, and the ranks behind came on like a tidal wave, until they were stopped by the wire entanglements. Then they all withered and went down in writhing heaps. But a still fiercer wave smote the trench, when a fresh attack swirled up, flinging hand-grenades and bombs ahead of them as they charged, killing or disabling every man in the trench before they were wiped out.

In a few minutes there was hardly an Englishman or a German who could stand on either side of the entanglements.

This was what the Germans were waiting for. They did not in the least mind sacrificing every man who had been sent to the attack, because they had a strong reserve of infantry ready to take their places, and occupy the trench.

Gray was leaving the Observation Post to go back to his billet when he noticed that the Germans were trying to surprise the trench. He rushed back to his post and telephoned for help—S.O.S.—and stood by the telephone waiting to see what he could do, though all seemed to be lost, and waiting meant being butchered.

His eye being very quick with observing, he made out in the dusk fresh infantry surging up from the front German trench. A dense column of them was preparing to hurl itself at the British front line. There was no one to withstand them in our trench. It seemed lost, irrevocably, when his eye fell on a machine-gun close to his post ; the whole

of its crew lay in a ring about the gun dead ; but its belt was attached, and hardly begun, because the Germans had bombed its detachment directly they topped the parapet.

He could make out in the dusk that the infantry were all heading for one point in the ditch, so he knew that it must be bridged somehow, and, leaving his telephone, he dashed to the machine-gun, and catching it up in his arms, made muscular with games, ammunition-box and all, he got out of the trench and staggered forward till he was near enough to see through the quickly-falling night the spot where the Germans were about to cross the ditch. He planted the gun full in the face of the heavy column of Germans, and there, absolutely alone, he sat down, while his fingers raced the cartridge-belt through the feed-block. Under that spray of death the advancing column wavered, broke, and ran back to the trench from which it had issued, leaving scores of dead, which the spluttering Maxim had mown down.

Hearing one machine-gun maintaining its fire, the few survivors in the British trench whose wounds allowed them to move, dragged themselves out with what ammunition-boxes they could lay hands on, to where Gray was crouching, and at the same time prepared to protect him by their rifle-fire from being rushed, and to feed him with a full belt as fast as he emptied one.

It was fortunately too dark for the sharpshooters and machine-gunners in the German trenches to pick them off, though a hail of fire was turned on the flashes of Gray's gun. But a wounded bomb-thrower of the original attacking-party, who had been brought down by the British rifle-fire close to where Gray planted it, managed to hurl a bomb at him, which shattered his left leg.

At this moment a fresh German column dashed out to the attack, and Gray thought that it was all over. But by a supreme effort he retained his consciousness, and one of the wounded who were with him, by putting his back against Gray's managed to prop him up, and let him continue firing the gun.

But he could not adapt his fire so rapidly now, and the wounded men who were guarding him with their rifle-fire, one by one fell back, killed or exhausted, and worst of all, the ammunition gave out.

The gun made its last sputter. In a minute all would be over, and the great question solved for Mirabel.

The Germans, hearing the discharges stop, rushed across their bridge with a fierce yell, to trample under foot and stab any remaining life out of the men who had been serving that gun till they were shot down. They thought that this was why the gun had ceased to fire.

They were not more than a few yards from him now. He could see their forms leaping towards him like wolves out of the gloom.

As a last defence of himself and the stricken man who had held him up so staunchly, he emptied his Browning into them. Fired low, at that hand-to-hand range, each bullet banged through a man, and sometimes through a second, into another. But they were of no more use than feathers in stopping that rush.

As he lay there, helpless to move a yard, he raised himself on his elbow to look death in the face and die fighting, even if it only meant flinging the empty pistol into the face of the man who was running him through.

It seemed an age coming, that bayonet-thrust, with a face of grinning hate behind it. While he waited for it, he was trampled into insensibility from behind.

* * * * * *

In an infantry charge at night you cannot see or stop to pick your way, and thus it was that Gray and his comrade were trampled as they lay, by the little men who came from the mean streets on the Eastern edge of London—the sweepings of Ratcliff and Stratford, costermongers and corner-boys and boxers, familiar with bloodshed from their cradles. These men, stunted in mind and often in body till they are hardly within recruiting measurements, fear neither God nor man, neither pain nor privation, and nothing can kill their grim humour. They are the Tommies of Tommy Atkinses. The word “scrap” has a magic for them from their childhood.

And here they had a “scrap” after their own hearts, in the open, with no barbed wire to stop valour, and in the dark, where machine-guns and rifles fire blindly.

The fierce Bavarians flung themselves at them as men

will who know that impact must win. And they were much bigger men.

But weight cannot strike like fierceness, and in the dark, where formations are lost, the man who does not care what happens to himself because he is so drunk with the delight of killing, is more than a match for stolid bravery. The side which enjoyed it won, as it always will. The Germans tried to defend themselves ; the East-enders scorned safety. Many of them had thrown down their rifles, and made the attack with bayonets only, using them for thrusting as the Roman legionaries used their dirks against the long swords of the Teutonic barbarians. In such a fight the men with the dirks are cut down right and left till they have broken the formation of the men with the longer weapon, but then it is all over : in the *mêlée* the dagger-thrust carries everything before it.

So fared these Bavarians. No help was sent for them, since there had been no sound of firing, and they had been dispatched to take possession of an empty trench, which they should hold with ease till the German line moved forward.

Therefore the fight was fought to a finish. The Terriers were not out to take prisoners ; they were out to kill ; and they killed till there was nothing left to kill, to the very edge of the ditch, where they found the gratings, and carried them back in triumph to the British trench. No more Germans could come over now, and they might serve the British on a later day.

Ere they got back, the stretcher-bearers, those modern antivalkyrs who snatch the wounded from death, had found the man who had saved a British trench almost single-handed, insensible, and within an ace of death by loss of blood. He lay as still as the dead men round him, but the practised touch detected that this one was alive, and might live, though his wounded leg would never recover from the trampling. So the stretcher-bearers checked the haemorrhage and carried him back to the Field Dressing Station, where the Medical Officer prepared him for the journey, and he was put into the ambulance, which had followed close on the heels of the reserves that he had summoned, and taken to the Clearing Hospital.

There he lay for some time after his leg had been amputated, too enfeebled by what he had gone through to be moved.

He revived long before they expected him to, when they were trying to unclasp the watch from his wrist. It was of no use, for though the bracelet was only bent, the bomb had beaten the watch-face into the works, and the nurse thought he might scratch himself with it. But he was so agitated by the attempt to remove it that the medical officer who had charge of the case at once ordered it to be left.

As soon as he was allowed to see people, Worboys, who was growing as tough as leather with war, rode over to see him whenever he had a chance, and Linacre, who could hardly ever be spared, since the Major was worse than useless, came once.

Young, who had developed into a most useful and scientific soldier, had found a regular post in another Battery, and had distinguished himself in the great fight at Neuve Chapelle.

CHAPTER LI

HOW OLIVER GRAY POSSESSED HIS SOUL IN PATIENCE WAITING FOR A LEG

AT Rouen Gray improved rapidly, because he found a touch of home there in the person of Mollie Menteith, the niece of Lady Douglas, who used to help her at her receptions. Sister Mollie was a probationer nurse, and it was her business to wait on the wounded in his ward, and keep them cheered and amused, when their wounds had been seen to by more experienced hands.

In spite of his change of dress and surroundings, and the fact that he went off to sleep before she could speak to him, she recognized Gray at once, and created quite a little flutter in the ward by telling them who he was. Almost every soldier who had ever been in London knew the *Babylon*.

When he woke she brought him his letters.

"Don't you recognize me, Mr. Gray?" she asked.

In her nurse's dress he could not 'place' her. He thought it was due to the dress, but it was quite as much due to her popularity. At Lady Douglas's she had been overshadowed by the presence of so many pretty and well-known women, and had shrunk into herself in consequence. Here, where her business in the ward was to attend to the patients'

wants and keep them amused, the qualities which had made her such a good hostess, and the sympathetic expression given to her face by her beautiful eyes and teeth, made her the idol of the wounded men, while the zest of being the favourite of a roomful of fine men made her look a different person ; it was so delightful to come into her own as a woman.

"Don't you recognize me, Mr. Gray ?" she repeated. "I'm Mollie Menteith, whom you met so often when I was helping my aunt with her receptions at Lanarkshire House."

"Forgive me for being so rude and stupid," he said, with the charming manners which endeared him to every woman in his employ. "You know that I wasn't looking for you here, Miss Mollie !"

"Sister Mollie."

"Yes—Sister Mollie. How long have you been here, Sister Mollie ?"

"Only a few weeks."

"Did you see Mirabel—Mirabel Douglas at all recently before you started ?"

"Yes, only a day or two before."

"How was she looking ?—do tell me."

"As most of us poor women have to in the war—wistful eyes in a cheery face. She was all right in health, but her heart was in France."

Her heart was in France ! Thank God for that ! Archie did not come into his mind at that moment. Her beautiful cousin was very much in Mollie Menteith's mind. She knew that Gray had been with Archie when he died, but it was flatly against orders to talk of such matters in a ward of wounded men. So, much as she wanted to hear about it, she kept to Mirabel. She had, of course, no idea that Mirabel was Gray's wife, or even that she had anything particular to do with him, beyond being his leading lady. At Lanarkshire House Mirabel was regarded in the light of Archie's latest, and The Douglas's cousin, and to Mollie, who was rather stage-struck, she was above all a beautiful and well-known actress, and therefore much to be envied. Mollie had enjoyed her intimacy with Mirabel immensely. Mirabel was popular with women because, except when she was on the stage and confronting an audience, she never seemed to remember her beauty, and far from desiring the attentions of the men whom she met, she seemed to dislike

attentions from anybody but Lord Douglas, whom she treated like an uncle. She had been constrained even with Archie, her cousin, a most difficult person for constraint.

"So you're another of Mirabel's admirers?—another of the people who are crying for the moon?"

"That describes the case exactly, I'm afraid," he said, with a sad little smile.

Being nurse in a ward makes one rather an adept in character-reading. Here was a patient who had to be fed on Mirabel Douglas, and encouraged about her.

He obviously was very hard hit, because he wrote to her every day. To be sure, he wrote to Miss Maitland, Lady Douglas's latest idol, nearly every day also. But as the two ladies lived at the same address, he most likely only wrote to Miss Maitland as a helper or *confidante*.

A *confidante* Paula was, in a rather unusual sense, for one difficulty which Gray had found when he was starting for the front, was to answer the War Office query as to who was his nearest relative for the authorities to communicate with in case anything should happen to him. Beyond his wife he had no relative, and nobody was allowed to know that she was his wife. Moreover, to have news sent to her would be an indirect contravention of the pact that no effort should be made to influence her attitude towards him.

He finally, with her consent, nominated Paula Maitland. It would not be his fault if news filtered through to his wife, and it made a very important party in the situation his friend.

Paula, on her part, promised not to communicate any piece of information to his wife until she had first obtained his permission for her to do so.

Sister Mollie could not see why she should not read and write his correspondence for him, as she was a friend of both Mirabel and Paula. His doing it for himself she considered unnecessary exertion for a man who had lost his leg.

He thanked her most gratefully, but explained that his correspondence was of too private a nature, as it certainly was. But though he would not let her help him with his letters, she always found her way back to his bedside whenever she was free. She was fascinated with his lightheartedness. Only two things ever worried him; one was the thought that he would not be able to go into the fighting

line again, and the other that he would not see Mirabel for some weeks yet, because he did not mean to allow himself to see her before he could use his artificial leg. He had Mirabel's word for it that when he came back from the war she would try to be his.

His favourite object of conversation was Mirabel. He loved to talk of her triumphs in "Mary, Queen of Scots," which he had never before had the opportunity of doing with anyone but Lady Douglas. Sister Mollie liked any kind of theatrical gossip, and naturally was most interested of all in hearing about Mirabel, who was the only popular actress she knew; he liked to sing the praises of Mirabel's acting because he could not sing her praises as a woman as much as he wished, without imperilling his secret.

It was easy to find food for the praises, for she had "made good" the appointment, which he had given her because he was in love with her, beyond all hopes. In the first place, there was her personality. The Douglasses were a strikingly handsome family, of the Scottish aristocratic type, and her Visconti mother had been as engaging as she was beautiful. Mirabel had combined the charm of both types. She was so lovely as a child that her baptismal name of Isabel had been twisted by their neighbours, with the Italian fondness for nicknames, into Mirabella—*the marvellously beautiful*.

She had been born with the sunniest disposition, too often frozen, as she grew up, by her father's neglect of her mother, while she was alive, and of herself after her mother's death. His attitude had taught her the defensive which she was practising against a doting husband, because he had forced her to marry him.

The play in which she was acting exactly suited her mood, for the only dramatic features in it were the unwelcome marriage with Darnley and the immoral advances of Chastellard, the latter of which provoked the Queen's anger, while her feelings suffered martyrdom in the former. In her graciousness to Rizzio, and the graces she lavished on the audience when they encored her, Mirabel showed what an adorable wife she could have been to a husband whom she loved.

Every night she threw into the play the intense disappointment of her own life, and it was put down to her powers as an actress. People raved about the feeling she put into

her songs. It required no putting in : it was the expression of her own longings.

But the world did not know this. Even her own husband, who was also the owner and manager of her theatre, did not know it. He had not the smallest conception that all the feeling she put into the play was a protest, conscious or unconscious, against their own marriage. He put it all down to the dramatic genius of his adored Mirabel, and it was the unending theme of his conversations with the patient Mollie, who really enjoyed it, partly as a sort of tribute to the Douglas family, partly because, since he came under her care, she had fallen half in love with him herself, and he showed the attractions of a lover to her while he was being a lover to the memories of his wife. Because she was so sympathetic a listener, some of the sunshine fell upon her.

She wished increasingly that he would let her be his *amanuensis* in the correspondence with Mirabel—let her be the *confidante* instead of Paula ! For she was convinced that his letters to Paula must be a more private edition of his raptures to her.

He had, indeed, nominated Paula to the War Office as his "next-of-kin," but the War Office had made only a single communication to her since he had been out in France, and that was to say that he had lost his leg. He had made his nurse, at the first hospital to which he was taken, write to Paula to say that he wished the news to be withheld from Mirabel, the fact being that he did not wish to appear to be trading on her compassion.

In his letters to Mirabel herself, which he wrote as soon as he was allowed to use a pencil, he told her that he was in hospital at the Base, but hoped to be better soon and that he would then be sent home on leave.

Knowing how keen Gray was to be in the fighting-line, Mirabel was delighted at the prospect of seeing him again before his life was in further danger, but her feelings about her marriage, instead of continuing the change in his favour, which had begun at Westernport, had undergone a severe reaction against him, because she felt that she never could forgive him for preventing her from marrying Archie. It was because he could not marry her that Archie had not made a war-marriage before his regiment went out, in the hopes of leaving a son to succeed to the Earldom of Douglas.

That such a piece of physical perfection as Archie should have passed from the earth without lifting his little finger to leave a child behind him seemed to her too terrible.

The letters from Mirabel and Paula were couched in very different terms. Paula, who had received the official information from the War Office, wrote wildly anxious letters, full of enthusiasm and admiration. Mirabel, who had only received the messages which he had dictated to nurses, continued to write to him every day, as she had promised, quietly sympathetic letters, which were much more taken up with giving him satisfactory news about the theatre than with himself. This was largely his own fault, for in his determination not to let her be frightened, he dictated a reply to Paula (who had written to enquire how much she should let Mirabel know), in which he begged her to say that he was not dangerously wounded, and that he was going to be sent on home when he could stand the journey, and he added : "I shall stay over here, if I am allowed, until I am in a state not to alarm her. I should like, if possible, to stay here till I am allowed to wear a cork leg, so as not to shock her when she sees me. God bless you, Paula, for all your kindness. Keep Mirry's spirits up at any price."

To which Paula replied :

" Bolingbroke House,
" Chiswick.

" September —th, 1915.

" MY DEAR OLIVER,

" What a hero you are ! If Mirabel doesn't marry you after this, she ought to be condemned to singleness for life ! But, oh, why are you so English ? Just as England allowed Germany to make every possible preparation against her, and refused to take the slightest precaution herself—just as we are protecting the interests of German trade in England now, instead of rebuilding British trade by protecting our wheat-growers and dyers and bottle-blowers—so you are trying hard to help Mirry against yourself, instead of accepting all the legitimate chances of the situation to win her !

" I have perceived for a long time that you are not allowed to woo her in any way, direct or indirect ; that you have to be strictly a friend, and not a lover, in all your relations to

her. But that is no earthly reason for your preventing me from imparting facts to her which have not come through you, and which might materially influence her decision in your favour. This is mere quixotism, and indefensible injustice to yourself. She doesn't deserve such treatment.

"Murry's very charming. She is ever so sweet and affectionate to me. But she is shutting you out from her heart by a blind wall of prejudice and hysteria, which is the most unjust thing that I ever remember. I should like to thrash her often.

"It is plain that if once she was married to you, she could not live a week with you without finding out what a good husband you were, and giving you her whole heart. Do let me tell her everything, and believe me,

"Always your affectionate,

"PAULA MAITLAND."

Any chance Paula might have had of convincing him was obliterated by her prophecy that if once they were married Mirabel would give him her heart. Unfortunately, they had been married, and he knew how little effect a month of absolute devotion had made on her heart. And the case was really even worse than he knew, for he was not aware of the fresh tide of resentment against their marriage which was rising in her heart since Archie's death.

To Mirabel, as soon as he was allowed to write himself, he had written that he was getting on nicely, and soon, unless he had a relapse, would be sent over to Osborne to rest and refit before he was allowed up to London.

She had the grace, in spite of her resentment, to write back a letter which began :

"POOR OLD JACK,

"I didn't realize that you were so bad that you would need a term at Osborne before you can come up to London." (This was true.) "I am so rejoiced that you are safe and sound" (and this was true, in spite of that unruly thought which had come into her head for a moment while she was talking to Lord Douglas.) "I am looking forward so to seeing you. I shall come down to meet you at Southampton, if you will let me know when the hospital-ship will arrive," etc.

At this point he laid the letter down to call Sister Mollie to ask if he might see Colonel Molony, the medical officer in charge of the hospital, who had taken a great interest in him since he found out who he was, and often came to have a chat with him.

"Well, Gray, what is it this morning?" asked the Colonel cheerily, when he came in. His cheeriness was one of his principal assets in getting the appointment. He was not as good a surgeon as the two young R.A.M.C. Captains who were under him.

"My leg, Colonel."

"Of course, that's what you're here for, but your general condition doesn't seem to be any worse."

"No, I think it's better—that's why I sent for you."

"Well, it couldn't be called exactly an urgent case, then. But, after all, it's a pleasure to be sent for to hear that a patient is better, when you're generally only sent for when he's very much the other way. What's the leg doing?"

"Nothing, I hope, except resigning itself to circumstances. I sent for you to know how soon I shall be transferred to Osborne, because I want to stop my people meeting me at Southampton."

"Well, that's funnier still!"

"You would not think it very funny for me," said Gray, "if you knew how desperately anxious I am to see one of them! Can you stop them coming, sir?"

"Under the circumstances, I don't see why you want to do it!"

"Don't you, sir? Don't you understand that I want to have my other leg before I see her, so that she mayn't have the shock?"

"What a fool I am! Of course I do, and I think you ought to have a bar to that V.C. when you get it. What you're going through is as bad an ordeal as serving that machine-gun with only two or three wounded men at your back, and several companies of Germans in front. Well, we'll see what can be done. I can stop them coming to Osborne—we often have to pronounce a patient 'not strong enough to see friends yet' there. But Southampton Quay will be open to relatives of the wounded. I expect that all I can do there is to send you from the hospital ship to Osborne on a covered stretcher. I'll promise you that

much, anyway." He stroked his forehead, from which the hair was receding. "The best thing will be for you to write to your people, won't it?—I can write you a note to enclose to them, saying that it is injudicious. But if you'll excuse my saying so, I don't think you need take the trouble—since the lady, if she's worth her salt, will think it an extra attraction to find you minus a leg."

Gray thought so too. He thought that he would be breaking his word to Mirabel if he let her see him so maimed as he looked at present. It would be using the undue influence which he had pledged himself not to use, for one thing, and it also might be a terrible shock to Mirabel if she suddenly found herself the wife of a man who had had a leg shot off.

No one but himself, and perhaps Paula, could know what a penalty it was to him, to do without seeing Mirabel for two or three weeks longer than was necessary.

But he had no doubt in his mind that nothing less was demanded by duty.

Presently the Colonel brought him his note about it being inadvisable for friends to see him until they received a fresh notice from the authorities, and asked if that would do. Gray replied: "I think you might put in the word 'lady' before the friends, Colonel, because I want to see my manager very badly. My business needs it, and it will take my thoughts off."

"Quite so—I suppose you're anxious to hear how the theatre has been doing while you have been winning your laurels."

"While I have been away, at any rate, sir. And, by the way, I should like to give a hundred pounds to any object in connection with the hospital which you think most deserving, to show how I appreciate all that has been done for me."

"It will be very welcome—there are many small things urgently necessary, for which I can't get a Government grant."

"Will you allow me to pay for them all, then?" said Gray. "I should like everything to be right for the next poor devil whom you receive like you received me. Just let me know the amount which will make things comfortable, and you shall have it."

The Colonel went away with his heart very full, and Gray said, " Give me a sheet of notepaper, will you, Mollie, and a big envelope, to write to Paula ? "

Mirabel never saw his letters to Paula, because Paula was very secretive about her correspondence, and always had it laid on the bureau in her study, which, as sacred to the absolute silence she required for writing, Mirabel never entered without an invitation.

Gray's letter ran :

" No. 10 Base Hospital,

" Rouen.

" October —th, 1915.

" MY DEAR PAULA,

" I am sending Mirry a letter from the Surgeon-Colonel in charge of the hospital here, which speaks for itself. But I got him to write it, and you know why. He says that I am very, very much better, and may be sent over to Osborne any time now. Mirry is sure to come to you about it, and I must trust to your tact.

" I made him confine the prohibition to lady-friends, because I want to see Old Mac and others, about the theatre, so as to get my mind off myself. Of course, I'd let you come, but I couldn't do it without letting Mirry come too, or she'd never forgive me.

" You know what doing without her means to me, but I couldn't let her see me like this. I am right, aren't I ? Write and say that I am.

" With warmest regards,

" Always yours,

" OLIVER GRAY."

To Mirabel he wrote :

" No. 10 Base Hospital,

" Rouen.

" October —th, 1915.

" MY DEAR MIRABEL,

" I have good news for myself. I believe that I am to be transferred to Osborne quite shortly, though I am by no means all right yet, and am not going to be allowed to see you for a few weeks more. You can't tell what a trial it is to me to control my impatience, and it will be still worse when I am on English soil, and yet not seeing you ! But,

humanly speaking, it can be only for a few weeks, and then it will be perfect happiness for me, as perfect as it can be until you are mine.

“ Always yours,
“ OLIVER GRAY.”

Mirabel did not allow him to use any signature which would betray their marriage if the letter was left about.

Those words, “until you are mine,” stabbed Mirabel. How was she to tell honest, affectionate Gray that she was further from relenting than ever—now that she had a concrete as well as a general reason to regret having married him? Archie's having died unmarried was becoming an obsession with her, and she threw the whole blame of it on Gray, forgetting that if she had not been his leading lady she would, in all probability, have never met Archie at all, unless she had “looked up” Lady Douglas, which she had no intention of doing, for fear of being patronized, apart from the probability that without the glamour of the *Babylon*, Archie might not have given her a second thought, if he had met her at his mother's.

If anybody had put this aspect of the case to her in so many words, she might have recognized its justice. But there was nobody to do so. Lord Douglas, the only possible person, had never been told how she came to know the beloved Archie.

Paula did not dare to write and tell him of the philosophical calm, the almost air-of-relief, with which Mirabel received the intelligence. It was not want of kindness or affection which made her like this, but the problem which confronted her, since after the heartiness of her partings with him at Westernport and Southampton, it would be difficult to remain stationary. She had told him that she *might* relent when he came back from the war, and now she felt that Archie's ghost would always stand between them.

Therefore she was willing to put off for as long as possible that meeting with a wounded soldier which would either betray her into evincing more sympathy than she felt in cold blood, or into behaving unhandsomely to one who had bled for his country with the courage of a hero.

And over in France yet another woman had given her heart to Gray, who had already been loved by so many before he met Mirabel ! Sister Mollie—Mollie Menteith—who had waited on him hand and foot during his last days in the Base Hospital, felt a cold hollow under her heart the day that he was carried on to the hospital-ship, and wrote to Lady Douglas :

“ No. 10 Base Hospital,

“ Rouen.

“ October —th, 1915.

“ DEAR AUNT JANET,

“ I told you in my last letter that I had been nursing your friend, Oliver Gray, at Rouen. By the time that you get this he will be at Osborne. But he won’t be allowed to see any ladies for two or three weeks, because, to tell you the truth—strictly *entre nous*—he is so madly in love with Mirabel Douglas that it would not do for him to see her before he is stronger, unless she means to accept him. I can’t think what she means by hesitating. I’d marry him to-morrow if he asked me. He’s just the nicest man who has been through this hospital. And they are darlings, I can tell you, some of them. I’m always losing my heart. I know that you’ll think the same of Oliver Gray as I do, when you know him better.

“ Perhaps you’ll be able to talk Mirabel over. I wish you could, though I’m desperately jealous of her.

“ With best love,

“ I am,

“ Your affectionate niece,

“ MOLLIE.

“ P.S.—Grey old Rouen is full of English Society women—especially the pretty young ones.”

CHAPTER LII

HOW LORD DOUGLAS WENT DOWN TO OSBORNE TO SEE OLIVER GRAY

GRAY felt very severely the solitude to which he had condemned himself at Osborne. When he cannot move about is just the time when a man needs the society of those whom he loves.

But Mirabel could not have remained with him in any case, for "Mary, Queen of Scots" was on its last legs, and without its leading lady would speedily have collapsed.

The chief break in the monotony for him was when Lord Douglas made Gray's being there the occasion of a visit to the Isle of Wight, to see what horses he could raise in it for his remounts. He spent three days in the Island, putting up at East Cowes, which is only a mile or so from Osborne, and each day dined and passed the evening, until he was turned out, with Gray. He also had a car with him, and took Gray for drives every day.

When he arrived and found him hopping about cheerily on crutches with a leg and a half, his heart went out to him. He would have given much to be able to tell him that he knew his secret, and would do all he could for him with Mirabel. But he had given his promise, and could only talk as if Gray were still a suitor, trying to win her hand, instead of her husband, trying to win her heart.

He gave no name when he arrived, and the orderly, who would have demanded it if he had been in plain clothes, was content to say simply, "A gentleman to see you, sir."

"What does he look like?" asked Gray.

"A Colonel, sir—a Cavalry Colonel."

"Well, show him in."

The man left the visitor at the door, and did not hear Gray's glad exclamation of surprise. "Lord Douglas! How kind of you to come and look me up!"

"Call me Colonel Douglas, will you?—I know a lot of people in the Island, and if they knew I was here, I shouldn't get so much time to spend with you. Well, how are you, Oliver, my boy?"

He had never called him Oliver before, but now he was speaking, he knew, to Mirabel's husband.

"Better than could be expected, I believe. But I'm a lame duck till I get my other leg, which will be here in a day or two, and then I'm told that with a little practice I shall be able to hop out of a dog-cart."

"Let's be serious for a minute, Oliver, while I congratulate you. It was glorious, Oliver, glorious! To my mind, worth a V.C.—far more than the sublime self-sacrifice of dashing out to save a wounded man, through fire which no one could expect to survive, is. For the one is fine soldiering, skilled

fighting, and the other is the heroism of stretcher-bearers. If every stretcher-bearer and mine-sweeper who deserved a V.C. got it, what thousands there would be ! There are no grander people in the world than the Quakers who have become mine-sweepers, because they object to taking human life ! ”

“ I think so, too. I feel such an undeserving creature beside them ! ”

“ You needn’t—you’ve done your bit, and you did it at the right moment ! ”

“ Well, I’m glad I saved the trench. But tell me what I am dying to know, Colonel Douglas—how is Mirry, really ? ”

“ In health as well as she could be. But I’m not quite satisfied with her otherwise, Oliver—she’s so morbid.”

“ Morbid ? ” exclaimed Gray anxiously. “ What about ? ”

“ I suppose you want to hear the truth ? It’s no good telling anything but the truth ever, unless it’s a white lie to save a woman, is it, Oliver ? ”

“ No, tell me the truth. I intend to bear it.”

“ Well, the truth is that she’s horribly morbid about Archie’s death.”

“ I was afraid she would be. She told me how deeply in love with him she was.”

“ She told you ? ”

“ She told me everything. They did no wrong. They could not help loving each other. This was the perfect marriage of which she had always dreamed. And I stood in the way, and I could not remove myself. It was rotten luck for her.”

“ Rotten luck to have a man like you wanting to be her husband ! It’s an honour that hardly any woman deserves.”

“ Well, it seems to have got on her mind, and to be preying on her spirits.”

“ You must get on your new leg as soon as you can, Oliver, and try and revive her spirits.”

“ I will, I can tell you ! ”

“ And anything I can do to help you, you can rely on my doing it. I wish from the bottom of my heart that she’d make up her mind to have you. I came down here on purpose to tell you this. The Isle of Wight was one of a dozen or a score of places which were still on my list to visit, and I fixed on the Isle of Wight because you were here.”

“ Visit ? What for ? *Colonel Douglas . . . ? ”*

" Didn't Mirry tell you that I was one of the chief men in the Remount Department ? "

" Oh, of course, she did, but I've forgotten things a bit since I was knocked out. Have you done any good here ? "

" Yes, there are rather a lot of horses—the fact of having to put them on board ship to get them to their depots had kept them here."

" So your visit hasn't been in vain ? "

" My visit would not have been in vain, if I was going to turn straight round and go home after this talk with you. I am sure of what is best for Mirry, since I have seen you."

Gray tried to stammer out his thanks.

CHAPTER LIII

HOW MIRABEL TOLD HER HUSBAND THAT SHE COULD NEVER LIVE WITH HIM AGAIN

AND now the hour had come. Gray had had his artificial leg—naturally the best which money could provide—for a week now, since the wound was sufficiently healed, and he limped no worse than if he had fallen on the curb-stone outside the theatre and cut his knee painfully.

Lady Douglas, after that letter from Mollie, had sent him an invitation to stay for the present at Lanarkshire House, which he had been glad to accept. For the theatre, while " Mary, Queen of Scots," was quietly passing away, did not need his presence, and it certainly was not good for him to be living in his flat over the theatre with no one but his servants to look after him, and far too many people wanting to see him.

The proper place for him to be, undoubtedly, as Lord Douglas had pointed out to Mirabel, was at his wife's house, but she would not listen to him, nor in her present mood was it even desirable.

Mirabel was really in a worse state than her husband, for he was recovering from his bodily wound, and there was no improvement in her spiritual wound. On this one point she was practically insane.

Of course, she was at Victoria to receive him, and watch him from the railway-carriage to the car, and from the car

into the house, with wisely solicitude. She had received him with all proper outward demonstrations of affection. But she would not sleep at Lanarkshire House.

"It might—though I don't see how, for I know you won't give me away, Jim—lead to difficult questions, which are not so likely to arise if I come in after breakfast and go home without waiting for tea."

She and Paula, who, apart from the kiss at the railway-station, which excited so much interest in those who knew the famous Miss Douglas of the *Babylon* and its proprietor by sight, was really the more affectionate of the two, did not even stay for tea that first day.

The strain made itself felt on the very first afternoon. Lady Douglas, though she was not in the secret as to their marriage, having been told how devotedly in love Gray was, and how anxious for Mirabel to be his wife, since she liked them both immensely, was eager for the marriage to come off. And as Lord Douglas knew the real facts, he was disposed to take even better care that they should be left alone. But it was when they were left alone that the strain began.

Since Mirabel, after helping him to the comfiest chair, did not seat herself by him, but facing him on the opposite side of the fireplace, it was clear that she still meant to encourage the fiction among her friends that he was only very much in love with her and a candidate for marriage.

Though he felt that he could not in honour do otherwise, he had committed a tactical mistake in not seeing her while he was mutilated. For then the mothering instinct which is in every woman might have come to his aid. As it was, he did not see her until he had practically recovered from his wound, and looked almost as spruce and healthy as the day he left England, with the added attraction of the tan which the weather-beating of the trenches had given him.

Mirabel, when she remembered Archie, mingling with the dust on the battlefield, felt like Hotspur in the first part of Shakespeare's *Henry IV.*, when he says :

"But I remember, when the fight was done,
When I was dry with rage and extreme toil,
Breathless and faint, leaning upon my sword,
Came there a certain lord, neat, and trimly dressed,
Fresh as a bridegroom . . .
This bald, unjointed chat of his, my lord,
I answered indirectly . . ."

It seemed somehow to her as if he had got off lightly, though the papers, in the month after it had happened, were all ringing with his saving a British trench at Givenchy.

She was not cruel enough to let him see this, but it made the shade of Archie fall chill upon his hopes.

Now, in the first hours of having her husband back with her, and tortured by her interest in the war, she hung breathlessly on his words, as he told her the tale of the daily wrestle in the trenches, which he had witnessed, restrained unfortunately by modesty from letting her see how manfully he had borne himself when he had left his oxen in the furrow, and caught up his weapons to fight the assailants of his country.

It was pathetic, how he eclipsed every thought of himself with his chivalrous rhapsody on the death of Archie—in which he could only tell of the fight as he had heard it from others, and of Archie's wish to be carried into his post to see him before he died. He could not tell her the reason of Archie's wish without being questioned for his reply to him, which was a breach of his word to her. He ended the rhapsody with insisting how much more Archie had done for England than he had, till she almost grudged him the reputation he had won.

Though she had left him feeling more aloof than ever, she had paid him humble reverence, while she was listening to his tale from the front. But she would have paid the same to any soldier who had bled for his country, and was telling her what he had witnessed in battle.

To add to the morbidness of the situation, she began to tell him how cheap she felt to be acting in musical comedy while other women were doing war-work, from munition-making even down to being ticket-collectors, in order to take the places of men who might be soldiers.

"I have often felt the same guiltiness myself, Mirry, to think that I should be employing so many people in trying to be funny, even in trying to be risky, with a knowledge of the base features which arise from our plays, but whenever I have discussed this with men at the front, men who had not the faintest idea who I was, they always told me that I was wrong—that an England, where all this kind of thing was suppressed, so that the actors engaged in it might do war-work, would be a poor sort of England for fighters to return to for their brief holidays from risking their lives. They pro-

tested that the strongest asset in the *moral* of our troops was their invincible light-heartedness and determination to have jokes as usual. You can't dismay the man who has 'Jokes as usual' for his motto. Cockney courage is like radium. That is our justification, Mirry—like Baden Powell at Mafeking, we are helping the nation to keep its tail up."

This comforted her; there was a glimmer of a smile. But it was rather a poor homecome for a hero from his wife. And even that did not last, for presently her obsession began to assert itself, and she said :

"I'm sorry, Oliver, that I can give you no hopes of living with you as your wife. It is a brutal thing to say to my husband at the very first meeting, when he has come back disabled in the service of his country. But on the other hand, it is better that the relationship should be understood from the very beginning rather than that false hopes should be raised which have to be tragically ended. You might have thought from the way in which things were progressing at your departure that we were on the eve of a reconciliation. I thought so, and I advanced beyond what I now think possible. But things have changed since then. Events have happened which have placed them beyond our control. It will spare you pain if I do not explain further, but merely say, with every kindly feeling in my heart, that our relations cannot be closer than they were when you came to Bolingbroke House before."

"Speak out, Mirry. In vital matters like this I would rather know the worst than be left in the dark. What fresh wrong have I done you?"

"Oh, none, Oliver!" she hastened to say. "It is no longer your work; it is Fate's. But Fate could never have dealt me the blow if you had not given her the weapon."

"Don't try and spare my feelings by being enigmatical, Mirry. Tell me right out."

She took him at his word this time, and poured out her wail about Archie, the same wail that she had made to the bereft father. Nothing that anyone could do would ever repair the wrong. From a wail it passed to a denunciation which grew almost to a curse. An evil had been committed which could only be expiated by isolation and consecration to Archie's memory. She spoke as one who is going to enter a Trappist nunnery. Her great black eyes had the sinister fire of a Hebrew prophet's.

So obsessed was she that she did not notice that he was still wearing the Argus watch, which she had clasped upon his wrist, when they parted, though the bracelet was contorted and the works had been beaten into ashes when the bomb had shattered his leg. He had meant to wear it until they were united : now he meant to wear it as long as he lived.

She waited a little to hear if he had any protest to make. But he saw no use in protesting. And then to end the tension which was so exhausting to both of them, she said : "Would you like to see Paula for a few minutes before we go home ? "

"Yes, I should," he said. "Paula has been very kind to me."

"Would you like to see her alone ? "

"No ; for I might be tempted to discuss the situation, which would not be honourable to you."

Paula showed no lack of cordiality when Mirabel brought her in. She was overjoyed at seeing Gray safe home again, and gave little screams of delight when she saw how well he could manage his false leg, and how difficult it was to detect it. He did not need her help in the least, but she had to be holding him up with affectionate hands.

"I hope we are always going to have you on Sundays again," she said, "and I shall come and have tea with you here some day, in between this and then, so that you can tell me all you have been telling Mirry to-day. You're not going to the theatre this week, are you ? "

"No, indeed ! I'm going to stay here until 'Mary, Queen of Scots,' is taken off."

"Then I'll come on Wednesday, so that she won't have to hear any repetitions on Sunday."

CHAPTER LIV

HOW OLIVER GRAY WAS A GUEST AT HIS WIFE'S RECEPTIONS

MIRABEL'S mental aberration, for it practically amounted to that, on the subject of Archie, left Oliver Gray with a terrible hollow in his heart, notwithstanding the devotion of the Douglases. They had conceived a very deep and warm affection for him. Lady Douglas could not have told whether she was more attracted to him for his

heroic exploit at Givenchy, or for the quixotic consideration which he showed to Mirabel. Lord Douglas's esteem was yet further enhanced by his knowing that Gray, who was, except in point of family, a man after his own heart, had married his heiress.

"Make the most of him, Janet—he needs it," he said, when Gray came back from France, maimed for life, and found that he had lost the little advance which he had made with Mirabel. She needed no second recommendation after Mollie's letter. She was rich in natural goodness of heart, as she had proved by the cordiality and generosity she had shown to the minor lights at her *salons*; she felt an overwhelming tenderness for a wounded man; and a hero interested her more than any other kind of celebrity. Therefore, to have one staying with her during his convalescence meant so much that it could only have been increased by finding that she was doing her duty to the Douglas family in taking care of him.

She called him Oliver, not knowing that she had a right to, but because she had to fill up with his image the void which Archie had left in her heart.

That his profession as manager of the *Babylon Theatre* was so incongruous, both for a hero, and the maternal affections of the Countess of Douglas, was really an additional attraction, because it furnished such an inexhaustible subject for conversation.

She had a telephone put into his room for his convenience, in the long business talks which he had with Old Mac, and was almost elated with the idea that the gay *Babylon Theatre* was run from her house. The library was put at his disposal for what Grainger called "the dreadful people who come to see him upon theatre business."

It therefore soon became known at the theatre that their wounded proprietor was spending his convalescence with Lord and Lady Douglas at Lanarkshire House. It is nothing, of course, nowadays, to find a popular hero being nursed by strangers during his convalescence, and even if an explanation had been necessary, Gray's well-known intimacy with Lady Douglas's son would have been an explanation, but it gave "the Theatre" immense gratification, none the less.

On Sunday afternoons he and his hosts went to Mirabel's at-homes, which had grown large enough to need the studio.

For Paula had a wide circle of friends among leading authors and artists, and many people who had met Mirabel at Lady Douglas's on Sunday evenings, enjoyed going to the popular actress's house on Sunday afternoons.

But Paula was no longer the central figure at these receptions, because she had abdicated in order to devote herself to Dr. Cantelupe, who never missed a Sunday now. Paula, being really musical, was much flattered by the deference of the Principal of the Royal Lyceum, and gave him a deference in return which made him think that the Principal's Lodge at the Royal Lyceum needed a mistress like her, who would lend distinction to its functions.

Functions he was obliged to have, and, like Lady Douglas, he recognized the value of epigrammatists in giving a function its *cachet*. There were times when Paula reeled off *bons mots*, sometimes rising to the verge of epigrams.

One page of his commonplace book he had filled with a string of them, which he had taken down on his shirt-cuffs from Paula's lips during a single conversation.

"Popularity is the verdict of the crowd."

"Martyrs are heroes, but martyrdom is waste."

"I'm very Scotch; I go in for my own pronunciation and my own spelling."

"A vice lasts longer than a passion."

"Modern crime is a fruit of the tree of knowledge," and a dozen others.

Although he had these thoughts about Paula he did not dare to put them into words. But this did not prevent him from monopolizing her on Sunday afternoons.

These closed earlier now, because Mirabel and Paula always dined at Lanarkshire House on Sundays, while Gray was there—in addition to Mirabel's going there every other week-day.

But her going there, which should have brought them together, kept them apart. She came not only to see him, but because the house was full of Archie for her. His mother had never disturbed the bedroom which Archie had used as a boy, or the study which he had made out of the dressing-room adjoining it when he first went to Eton, and a study was necessary to his dignity. And there were portraits and trophies of Archie all over the house. When Mirabel left her husband she would sometimes wander about for an hour before she went home.

CHAPTER LV

HOW PAULA DISCOVERED MIRABEL'S SECRET

THE regrets which Mirabel had expressed to Lord Douglas at not being able to marry Archie, and be the mother of his child, had now begun to tinge conversations with Paula whenever they were alone. The subject had become an obsession.

One day Paula lost her patience and said: "Why on earth didn't you marry Archie? I don't see what there was to prevent you, except that you were under a great obligation to Oliver, and saw that he wanted to marry you!"

"It was impossible," said Mirry, in the firm way in which she had so often closed conversations on the subject.

"I don't see it," said Paula, who had long been itching to rebel. "It is no reason for refusing A because O wants very much to marry you, if you don't intend to accept O, and are dying to accept A! I am quite sure that Oliver would have retired in an instant if he had known that your heart was given to Archie."

"He did know," said Mirabel sullenly.

"Then tell me why he did not free you—no, I don't mean that . . . why he did not discontinue his attentions when he saw that you wanted to marry Archie."

"Because he couldn't."

"I don't see why."

"I can only say that he couldn't. I can't tell you why without betraying his confidence."

Paula was not satisfied, but to sound Gray was clearly out of the question. You cannot ask a man why he did not retire in favour of a rival in love when the only handsome course was to do so.

Slowly a suspicion crept into Paula's mind that Mirabel might be telling her the literal truth when she said that Oliver could not make way for Archie. If she was right in her suspicions many strange things which she had noticed would be explained.

The first person whose aid she sought was naturally

Dr. Cantelupe. He was such an admirer of hers that he would be bound to give her all the help in his power. But he was unfortunately one of the people who were least able to help her, because he knew, and was under an obligation to secrecy.

The second was Lord Douglas. He, too, was not so sympathetic as she expected : in fact, he appeared confused and annoyed.

" My dear Miss Maitland," he said, " I cannot allow myself to be associated with any prying into Mirabel's private affairs. And, considering your connection with her, I think that you would be very wrong in attempting to do so."

But Paula was a novelist by profession, and the unravelling of tangles was her special gift. A thousand copies of her detective masterpiece, "The Bloodhound," sold for every hundred copies which were sold of "The Lady of Lochleven."

Lord Douglas's behaviour only confirmed the authoress of "The Bloodhound" in her suspicions. She meant to solve this mystery, even if it involved a quarrel with Mirabel.

She next sought the aid of her old friend Mr. Gribble, the managing clerk of Ticknor and Fields, who happened, though she did not know it, to be Oliver Gray's lawyers. He, from his profession, must know how you could find out at some government establishment whether any marriage had taken place between two persons so recently as two years ago. So she asked him to dinner. As she need not dine till two hours later than Mirabel, there was no chance of their clashing. Mirabel did not, of course, get home till between eleven-thirty and twelve, and Paula meant to get rid of Mr. Gribble at about ten.

She did not broach the subject during dinner. She preferred to wait till they had adjourned to the drawing-room, and had taken their coffee.

She rang for the cups to be taken away, and said there would be no letters. Then she began her campaign.

" I want to find out if two persons were married to each other in the year 1913. How am I to set about it ? Do they keep any indexes of marriages at Somerset House ? "

" You need not trouble yourself," he said. " I go there every day to have documents stamped, and if you give me their names, I can find out in a jiffy, and will copy out the entry and post it to you—if they have been married."

"Their names," she said, "are Oliver Gray, Junior, and Mirabel Douglas. I can't say what name she would have registered under, because she was christened Isabel, but always uses her nickname Mirabel."

"I'm afraid that I can't help you in this matter, Miss Maitland," he said, "because Mr. Gray is a client—perhaps I might say the principal client—of Messrs. Ticknor and Fields, who are my employers."

Paula retained her presence of mind. "I'm not asking you to do Mr. Gray any injury. I want to do him a great service. Do you see that portrait?" she said, pointing to a splendid almost life-size photograph of Mirabel.

"Yes," he said, "that is this Miss Mirabel Douglas—I know her by sight. I . . . I . . . I have been to the theatre where she is . . . employed."

"Very much employed!" said Paula sardonically. "Well, she lives in this house. It is her house, and I live with her. She is really Mrs. Gray—a marriage nominally secret, though we have been presuming that everybody knew it. In fact, her reputation would suffer very much if it were not known that she is in reality Mrs. Gray. But some enemies of hers are circulating an ugly rumour that the whole story of the secret marriage is an invention. Now, if I can only find a copy of their marriage-register at Somerset House, and hold that in my hand till the proper time, I can circumvent their conspiracy. You can save me a great deal of trouble by procuring a copy of it for me; and you cannot prevent my employing someone else to make a copy of the entry, if you don't."

The clerk saw that he had given his case away by injudicious admissions, and judged that the best thing to do now would be to promise to procure what she required if she would swear that she would not use the information to injure Mr. Gray.

"Why, of course I will! My whole object is to help them both by being in a position to say that I hold actual proofs of the marriage."

"Well, on those conditions, I'll do it," he said, "but I can set your own mind at rest on the subject by mentioning that I saw the marriage with my own eyes, and was one of the witnesses to it, at the Chelsea Town Hall Registry Office."

"Oh, I am thankful!" she said, sighing with genuine relief. "Now perhaps I can settle that hideous affair!"

"You have sworn not to injure Mr. Gray, haven't you?" said Mr. Gribble.

"I would do almost anything in the world to serve him," said Paula. "Don't you know that he is the famous person who kept three companies of Bavarians out of the British trench at Givenchy when all the men who held it were killed or disabled?"

"Why, his name was J. Gray!"

"It's the same person. Didn't he sign his name J. Gray in the Register?"

"I didn't look," said Mr. Gribble. "Ticknor and Fields told me not to see too much, because Mr. Gray wanted it kept very quiet. You're sure it's the same, Miss Maitland?"

"Perfectly sure. Miss Douglas, as she still calls herself, and I live together."

Mr. Gribble took a taxi to the "Daily Mail" office. His duty to Ticknor and Fields prevented him divulging the valuable piece of information that Oliver Gray, Junior, was secretly married to his leading lady, the beautiful Miss Douglas, but it did not prevent him from divulging that the Second-Lieutenant J. Gray, R.G.A., whose saving of the British trench at Givenchy had filled columns in the newspapers, was no other than the famous "Oliver Gray, Junior," the proprietor and manager of the *Babylon Theatre*.

Mr. Gribble often made a semi-honest sovereign out of the newspapers—his taxi to-night would be charged as expenses—by selling the knowledge which came to him in his business, where there was no chance of his being discovered.

On the next night Paula was in possession of a copy of Mirabel's marriage-lines. How should she use it?

CHAPTER LVI

LORD DOUGLAS DECLARES

PAULA had mined Mirabel's position, though she had not exploded the charge yet. A fresh movement against it was begun a day or two afterwards.

Before Mirabel went out after lunch the big, old-fashioned

front-door bell, which Paula had insisted on retaining when the house was being done up, rang, and Lord Douglas was announced.

"I came to see you here," he said, "because I have tried in vain to get a private talk with you, when you've been to see Oliver lately?"

"What do you want to say to me, Jim? Paula's not at home. She's lunching with Mrs. Peroxide."

He came directly to the point. "I want you to tell Oliver, or to let me tell Oliver, that I know about your marriage."

"I don't see why he should be told," she said. "I shan't tell him, and you can't, because you are pledged to secrecy."

"That's quite true," he said, "and it is the line which I thought you would take. I can do nothing but demonstrate my disapproval by slipping away at the first decent chance whenever you enter a room."

"By making an exhibition of me, in fact."

"No—I said *decent* chance. I should always be particularly careful to act up to this by not leaving you too abruptly. I should naturally leave off coming here, unless you asked me formally to meet people."

"I was wrong when I used that word exhibition, Jim," she said penitently. "I might have known that you couldn't do anything ungenteimanly."

She pulled the comfiest easy chair a little nearer the fire for him.

"I don't see how I can say yes," she said. "At all events, when I have a thing sprung upon me like this. But sit down and talk quietly of other things, and then perhaps an idea will come to one of us."

"If I could talk things over with Gray, I think it would clear them up a bit," he suggested.

"But I don't want them cleared up," she answered. "There is only one way in which they can be cleared, and that is by my acknowledging the marriage, and letting him come to live with me, and that is exactly what I am trying to avoid. Frankly, if it was not for *his* sake, I would rather never see him again. He's a darling, I admit that, but he brings such dreadful nightmares to my thoughts, whenever I am in the same room with him."

"Why not tell him that I know all about it, and announce

at the same time that you are not coming to see him again until you are converted?"

"I am sure that poor Oliver won't thank you for that. No one could help noticing how he loves to see me."

"But if he knew that it was for his own good, he would be strong enough to bear it."

"Oh, Oliver's brave," she said. "I knew that before the papers told the whole world about it!"

"Well, shall we try that?"

"I don't see the good," she said. "I shall hate your cutting me, Jim, in your own house, because now that Archie's gone, there's no one I love so much as you. But it's no good pretending. I don't want him to know that I have told you. For one thing, it will show him that I have broken my word to him."

"As if that mattered where his whole happiness is at stake!"

"It does matter," she said, "because if I had to confess to him that I had broken my word to him, how could I refuse to make the amends which I cannot make?"

"I don't see that any good is to be gained by my staying," he said, rather coldly, getting up to say good-bye.

"Well, if we are going to part, Jim, and it *is* parting in a way, I know, kiss me to show that we part friends."

"Better not," he said, shaking hands in an ordinary friendly way. "I belong to the other side."

CHAPTER LVII

WHAT PAULA SAID TO THE DOUGLASES AND GRAY ABOUT THE SECRET

PAULA, coming back from Mrs. Peroxide's, went in to see Gray. Her new discovery was burning a hole in the place where she kept secrets, and tackling Mirabel about it meant a battle, which even she, after all the conversational scratches she had received for her candour, dreaded.

She asked to see Oliver alone, and when she was shown in, astounded him by beginning, "Dear old man, I know all about it."

"All about what?" he asked, though he could not help guessing.

"Your marriage."

He did not deny it. He merely asked, "How did you find out?"

"A friend of mine came across the entry at Somerset House, and sent me a copy of it," she replied, not very ingenuously.

"Have you told Mirry?"

"No," and she added, with a similar absence of ingenuousness, "I want to talk to you about it first. Do you mind?"

"Mind?" he echoed. "It'll take a great load off my chest to be able to discuss it with someone."

"Well, first of all I want to reconcile it with all you have pretended since you came to Bolingbroke House. I want to have the satisfaction of nailing you in a few untruths."

"I never told you one."

"Never?"

"No, not one."

"Well, you acted a good many, then!"

"That's another thing. And you must remember that I was under a pledge to Mirry never to reveal it by word or deed."

"Yes, I believe that. But let's try and go through them, so that we may see how you played the game."

"Well, begin."

"First of all, there was that relative, who was so pleased with Mirabel's getting the post at the *Babylon Theatre*, that he gave her a house and *carte blanche* to pay for putting it in order and furnishing it. He began, I think, by putting a thousand pounds to her credit for the purpose. Do you know anything about that house and that thousand pounds, Oliver?"

"Of course I do, but I never told you anything about that, so I haven't got that on my conscience."

"You *were* the person who wanted her to cut a proper dash, and were horribly disappointed at her choosing a house in Hammersmith?"

"I certainly was. I think that even this house is too far out." Lanarkshire House was considerably east of the Albert Hall, but Gray's flat at the top of the theatre was

in Trafalgar Square, where London meets the West End.
“Who did you think it was ?”

“Well, I thought it was Lord Douglas. The seed was very cleverly planted in my mind, and you, if I am not mistaken, encouraged me in it ! No, I don’t think it was you : it was Lord Douglas himself, though I think he was like you, and preferred letting a lie go by default to telling it. One of these tainted truths was that he was ‘the elderly relative’ with whom she went to spend a month before she began her rehearsals.”

“Did Mirry say he was *elderly* ?”

“I fancy she did, but I’m not sure if she originated the idea. I may have understood him to be *elderly*, and may consequently have alluded to him as being *elderly*, and she and you and Lord Douglas—all you conspirators—may have encouraged me in the idea, without stating it to be a fact. In any case, I now conclude that you, and not Lord Douglas, were the relative, elderly or otherwise, with whom she did spend that month ?”

“Exactly,” he said. “It was our honeymoon.”

“Your honeymoon ? Why did she leave you ? Did you frighten her ?—or, excuse my being frank, disgust her in some way ?”

“Oh no. She gave me an excellent character. But unfortunately, it was part of the bargain she made in marrying me.”

“Bargain she made in marrying you ? Will you tell me about that extraordinary bargain ?” asked Paula.

“No,” he said, “I am not at liberty to tell you anything, except that I agreed to her leaving me at the end of the honeymoon, and I promised that if she let me go on seeing her in private, not to make the slightest advance to induce her to change her resolution.”

“How on earth did you ever agree to such a monstrous proposal ?”

“I would have agreed to any proposal which made her marry me, and I confess that, knowing how I loved her, I did not think that she would find it possible to adhere to her resolution.”

“You didn’t know Mirabel !” said Paula. “And I think that she’s a hateful wretch to have treated you as she has !”

“Don’t say that ! I can’t bear to hear her attacked !”

"Well, she deserves it!" said Paula, rather crossly. "But let's get on. Didn't she pay you another visit? She certainly gladdened the solitude of that 'elderly relative' again? It is not possible that . . .?"

"I don't know what you're going to say, but it isn't possible! It's last Christmas you're talking about, isn't it?"

"Yes, last Christmas. How do you explain that, Oliver?"

"Simply that when I was down at Round Table Island, she came and stayed at a hotel over at Westernport, so that I could see her to say good-bye, as I was ordered to France at the New Year."

"And didn't she even relent, when you were going to the front, and might never come back again?"

"I don't think I am at liberty to discuss that. But I will say that if I had thought that she was going to be more relentless than ever when I returned, I should have taken care not to survive."

"I think you did your best to do that as it was, you dear brave thing!" said Paula. "How I wish I was your wife! I should be so proud, and I should be so thankful to Providence for having given me such a good husband!"

"Thank you, thank you, Paula! But you mustn't call me that! No man with such a 'rainbow' past as I've had could be described as a good husband!"

"I don't agree with you," said Paula, "now. I was brought up a very strict Presbyterian, more especially with regard to refusing the good offers of the world, the flesh and the devil. But I am disposed to reject the Church's teaching about those who yield to temptations, since you and Archie have taught me that when a man has sown his wild oats, temptations may slide off him like water off a duck's back."

"They do off me, I can tell you! I don't care for anything in the world except Mirry! I do wish she'd . . ."

"So do I, Oliver! I can't think what's the matter with her! Of course I know it's Archie—that goes without saying! I mean that I can't make out why her regret for Archie should make her so horribly unfair to you."

"It was my fault, I suppose, for making her marry me."

"And wasn't it her fault, too? She married you with her eyes wide open; she must have thought that she was willing to give up her life to her art, as women are so fond

of saying. And then when new vistas opened up for her, she wanted to have her life back ; and I don't see that it's your fault that she couldn't ! ”

“ It may not be. But the fact remains that what I did robbed her of the dearest thing in the world ! ”

“ And if it did,” said Paula, “ it's all over now, and she ought to go down on her knees, and thank heaven for giving her such a long-suffering husband ! Most husbands would have had a good deal to say.”

“ Poor Mirry ! ” he said.

“ I'm tired of poor Mirry ! I think she wants . . . ”

At that moment Lord Douglas came in, and Paula said, “ I've found you out ! ”

“ Found me out ? Not in anything very dreadful, I hope ? ”

“ Well, I don't know what your opinions are on the subject of impersonation, but you let me believe that you were an 'elderly person' who presented Mirabel with the house in which we live, and paid for my furnishing it as I pleased, while it was really her husband there, who gave it to her, and paid for everything ! And you allowed me to regard you with real suspicion, which was not easily set at rest, because I thought she was in the habit of going away and staying with you ! I didn't like it a bit, I can assure you, though you may be fifty or sixty or seventy, or whatever you are ! And I find that you were just 'swanking'—that she never went to you at all—that she was quietly staying with her husband, that reprobate there, who used to sit in my drawing-room, going on as if he was trying to get engaged to her, when he was married to her the whole time ! ”

Lord Douglas looked at her in amazement, and she continued : “ These are not really my thoughts a bit ! I am just trying to be funny, as the easiest way of letting you know that I've found out that Oliver and Mirry are married to each other, which makes Mirry's behaviour worse than ever ! ”

“ May I ask how you found this out, Miss Maitland ? ” asked Lord Douglas. “ Did Mirry tell you in a fit of confidence ? ”

“ Did Mirry tell me in a fit of confidence ? ” she said. “ It looks as if she wanted to take the secret to her grave with her ! ”

" Well, how did you find out ? "

" By the excellent registration system of our country, which compels all marriages to be registered, and keeps copies of the entries at Somerset House ! I have a friend who goes there regularly, and he, knowing that I live with Mirabel, sent me this."

Being a woman, Paula thought that she was entitled to make a good story of it at a trifling sacrifice of accuracy.

" And you have confided all you know to Gray ? " he asked.

" All and a bit," she said, smiling.

" Thank goodness for that ! " he cried. " Now I can discuss it with him, which I've been dying to do ever since Mirabel told me about it, under a strict pledge of secrecy."

" Did she tell you ? " asked Gray, with quite unaccountable eagerness.

" Yes—why ? Oughtn't I to have mentioned it ? I didn't let on—I didn't tell the secret ! The guilt for that rests on Miss Maitland's pretty head."

" Very much," said Paula, with more meaning in her words than they attached to them. She had the sense to realize that the two men ought to be left to each other at that moment, so she ran out of the room, saying, " After that I shall hide my diminished head ! "

" Well, Oliver," said Lord Douglas, after the door closed, " I am glad that you are the man on whom the Douglas succession depends."

" It doesn't seem as if there's going to be much succession ! " said Gray bitterly.

" I must talk to Mirabel," said Lord Douglas resolutely. " She must put a stop to all this nonsense ! It could not be worse, in any case. But perhaps what she won't do for affection, she may do from a sense of duty. If she persists in this confounded behaviour, the Earldom of Douglas ends with me. You've got a better life than she has, for all your misfortunes in France, and if she won't live with you, and doesn't survive you, we shall have to say ' There was an end of an auld sang,' as Chancellor Seafield said when he signed the Treaty which united Scotland to England. But it can't be ! " he continued. " She can't be so wicked as that ! It's wicked enough for her to treat you as she does ! We'll all talk to her, and try and convince her ! "

" You know how eternally grateful I shall be, not only for

the succession, but because I want my wife . . . you can't think how badly!"

After that they spoke little, because both were thinking and planning.

Presently a knock came to the door, and Grainger came in to say that when Mr. Gray had finished speaking to Lord Douglas, Lady Douglas would like to see him.

"Go now, Oliver. Paula—Miss Maitland, has been telling her!"

Oliver jumped up so naturally and easily that it was almost impossible to believe that he had had a leg bombed off, and went off, hardly limping at all, to that famous small drawing-room.

Lord Douglas looked affectionately after him, and when he was out of earshot, said, "What a white man!"

Lady Douglas received him as anyone might have prophesied that she would, for she was very emotional.

"I don't care what Mirabel does!" she cried. "In this household you will always be a Douglas!"

CHAPTER LVIII

HOW MIRABEL TAXED LORD DOUGLAS WITH BETRAYING HER

NO one thought of warning Lady Douglas to be careful how she handled Mirabel. She thought a brief note of congratulation was sufficient for that night, and sat down and wrote it.

It reached Mirabel the next morning at breakfast-time, but she did not mention it to Paula, because it would have entailed telling Paula about her marriage. Instead of that, she ascertained by telephone from Grainger that Lord Douglas would be at home, and said she was coming round to see him on business at ten o'clock. She wished to see him before Lady Douglas came down.

He was waiting for her in the library when she arrived. She shook hands frostily, and as soon as Grainger had left the room, said :

"Well, Jim, what do you mean by betraying me?"

"Betraying you?" he said. "I haven't betrayed you!"

"Well, look at this," she said, handing him Lady Douglas's note. "How did Janet find out if you didn't tell her?"

"How should I know?" he said. "I didn't tell her: I didn't tell anybody!"

She grew still more wrathful. "Then Oliver must have told her!"

"I'm jolly sure that he didn't!"

"How can you be sure, unless you know who did?" asked Mirabel, with bitter scorn.

"Well, I do know who did!"

"You said you didn't just now!"

"Excuse me—I said, 'How should I know?'"

"Well, that's the same thing!"

"I'm afraid that I don't think so! I put it in that way because I did not wish to have the pain of refusing point-blank to tell you, but I repeat that it was not Oliver."

"Janet will tell me," she said confidently.

"I hope not! I shall not take any steps to prevent her, but I beg you not to ask her," he said. "It is so much better that you shouldn't know. It was an awkward thing for you to have to tell Janet about your marriage, after having kept it a secret for so long, so you ought really to be thankful that someone else has done it for you, and that we're all a happy family."

"Happy family!" she echoed, in angry derision.

"Well, I hope we shall be, when you've forgiven everybody!"

"I shall not forgive anybody who has had anything to do with it!"

"I hope you won't take up that attitude, Mirabel," he said. "The whole thing is too serious; not only are you being grossly unfair to the best of husbands, but as sole heir to the Douglas Earldom, if you persist in your wrong-headedness, the succession must fail; there can be no heirs but your heirs, and no one but Oliver can be their father while he is alive."

"I don't care what becomes of the Douglas Earldom now!" she said angrily. "While Archie was alive I would have gone through fire and water to maintain the succession! But Oliver saw to it that I should not have that privilege, and now he has to pay for it!"

"Unfortunately, it isn't only he who has to pay for it!"

He will, doubtless, now that you are the only possible heir, regret to lose his chance of becoming the ancestor of future Earls of Douglas, but his regret can be nothing to ours, who spring from a line that goes back beyond the days of the Bruce, and which we had hoped that we should pass on to remote posterity. My chance of doing it is dead—it was killed in the trenches! But you still have the chance, and it is your sacred duty to guard and cherish it!"

"Sacred fiddlesticks!" cried the enraged Mirabel.

Lord Douglas took no notice of the rudeness, but proceeded: "Do remember what is due to the family! You have been like our own child to us, ever since we met. And every blow you deal to Oliver falls on us with double force."

"I am sorry to injure you, Jim. . . . You have been very good to me! But after the injury which Oliver has done me, I do not intend to let him have the privilege of perpetuating our family."

"You talk a great deal of the injury he has done you, Mirabel, but, apart altogether from the Douglas succession, you don't appear to remember the other side of the shield—the injury which you have done a splendid Englishman, in the prime of his youth, a man who has covered himself with glory by his bravery in the war, by holding him to a renunciation which he made, as the law says, 'in defiance of public policy.' If you or your lawyers attached any pecuniary penalty to the breach of it, no court of law would enforce it, if, as I cannot picture him doing, he declined to pay it."

"He made his bargain, and if he is a gentleman, he must stick to it!"

"Yes, but that doesn't compel you to stick to it. And in my opinion, there is a solid reason, almost as strong as a legal reason, why you should tear up this unjust treaty. I cannot conceive you making such a condition, except on account of the loose life which he had led up to the time of his meeting you. You knew his reputation—which puts you in a not altogether favourable light for having married him—and because he would not agree to leaving you at the church door, I suppose, you imposed a limit of one month, in case, I presume, you should find yourself confronted by circumstances which you could not forgive. I do not allude to a circumstance like Archie's death, but to matters which no woman of spirit could endure."

" You're quite wrong. I made the condition intending that it should be observed absolutely ! "

" Oh, Mirabel ! I can't believe that any decent woman could have made a condition like that without intending to waive it, if her husband behaved like a gentleman to her during the period of probation ! "

" Then I suppose I'm not a decent woman, because I did not intend anything of the sort ! "

" That is not all," he said. " Even if this did not influence you, *noblesse oblige*, which has been the tradition of our family in history, ought to have something to say in the matter. If you don't love Oliver, and never did, as you say you never did, you must have married him wholly and solely for the worldly advantages which you were going to get out of the marriage—an unrivalled start in your profession, and a considerable income for life ! Do you think that worthy of a Douglas ?—because I don't ! "

" Well, if it isn't, I shall give him back the house, and all that's in it, and ask him to release me from my contract, so that I need not be beholden to him for a single penny ! "

" That's all very fine," said Lord Douglas, " but that isn't restoring things to the *status quo* before your marriage ! For, let alone the injury you've done to him, you have, in plain English, extracted an advertisement from him which should be worth about three thousand a year to you from other managers. What do you say to this ? "

" That it is not my fault that people should discover the gifts which I possess—that if he hadn't made them known, somebody else would ! "

" I don't say that they wouldn't, but you might have had to wait ten or twenty years for it, as you yourself pointed out ! "

" I don't know what you're raking all this up for."

" Because I think that you're behaving infamously ! You have got all you need out of a model husband, and you persist in maintaining this immoral bargain, which you made while you thought that he would be anything but a model."

" In fact, I'm so vile that I'm capable of doing anything except insinuating that you are making all this bother because you're frightened that the succession to the Earldom of Douglas will fail ! I don't make that insinuation—I couldn't

believe it of you. But there is no other crime against society which I do not appear to have committed!"

"Don't talk like that, Mirry!" he said, suddenly changing his tone to one of greater affection. "I stand in the relation of a father to you, more especially since you have become my heir, and it is my duty to tell you when I think you're behaving unworthily, particularly when a little generosity will make two lives so happy! You were born generous—anyone can see that—but a sort of mania has made you untrue to your natural instincts. And no one could deserve your generosity more than Oliver. He's a splendid chap, and he's behaved like a trump to you!"

"I don't care!" she said. "Nothing shall make me change my mind! I'm not going to live with him, that's all! And he can either cancel the contract, and take back what he's given me, or go on just as we are! You can settle that between you!"

"Mirabel! Mirabel!"

"You'd better not say any more, or I expect I shall say something worse! I shan't come here again for the present, so I'll go and say good-bye to Janet."

"You need not make any declaration about not coming here: you wouldn't come until you wanted to, in any case."

She moved towards the door. "I won't offer to shake hands with you," she said, "you won't want to shake hands with such a bad Douglas! I won't think hardly of you for anything you have said. . . . You've been the best friend I've ever had, and I know you've said all these horrid, awful things for the best. But they have not moved me a hair's breadth to the right!"

CHAPTER LIX

HOW MIRABEL LEARNED THAT IT WAS PAULA WHO HAD DIVULGED HER SECRET: AND HOW SHE LOST HER HOLD ON LIFE

WHEN Mirabel entered the room where she was sitting, Lady Douglas rose to greet her with even greater cordiality than usual.

"My dear," she said, "I am so glad to find that you and Oliver are married to each other! I think he's a lovely man: there's no one I'd rather see you married to!"

She had got thus far before she noticed how irresponsive Mirabel was.

" You're all in the conspiracy against me ! " said Mirabel. " You want to make me live with Oliver ; but it's no good : I'm not going to ! "

" My dear," said Lady Douglas, " do you realize what you're saying ? Instead of saying this, it would be much better if you were to set to work to explain why you haven't been living with him since you were married, until he went to France ! "

" Oh, that's easy to explain," said Mirabel. " It was part of our marriage-contract."

" Then the best thing you can do, Mirry, is to tear it up ! I'm sure Oliver will be willing to ! "

" I know he would ! But I just don't mean to : that's flat, Janet, so please don't talk about it ! "

" But, my dear, I must talk about it ! It's so wicked of you not to do it ! "

" Well, if you must talk about it, I must leave you," she said, getting up to bid Lady Douglas good-bye.

She hesitated a little as their hands met, but Lady Douglas bent forward and kissed her affectionately, saying, " We can part friends, even if we cannot remain friends."

As Mirabel reached the door, she turned round for a moment and said, " It's very tiresome, this having arisen between us ! "

" It is, indeed it is ! " sighed Lady Douglas, who was extremely fond of Mirabel. " I'm beginning to wish that Paula hadn't told me ! "

Mirabel flew down the stairs as if she expected to be shot. Seeing the serene Grainger waiting for her in the hall, she said, " Oh, Grainger, call my car as quickly as you can : I'm in a terrible hurry : I want to catch Miss Maitland before she goes out of town ! "

Grainger imagined no evil. He considered that authoresses lacked ballast—that it was just the sort of thing they would do to fly out of town without giving the servants any warning, like proper members of society.

Once in the car, Mirabel clenched her teeth. She meant to have it out with Paula. It was a good thing, perhaps, that the car had to go a couple of miles before she was in Paula's presence, because it gave her time to reflect, and she reflected vigorously.

When she had let herself in with her latchkey, Paula was in the hall, arranging flowers. Mirabel went straight past her, into the little still-room in which cut flowers were put when they came into the house, until they could be arranged. As she expected, Paula followed her.

Mirabel stepped back, and closed the door. "How dare you!" she said. "How dare you go and tell my secrets to Lady Douglas!"

"I did it because it had no business to be a secret," said Paula, who abounded in courage, and had dared the risk of being turned out of the house many times rather than not speak her mind.

Mirabel placed a restraint on her temper. This was the answer she had expected from Paula, when she was anticipating their meeting, as she drove home.

"It was my secret, and you had no business to reveal it to anybody!"

"I've told you why I couldn't keep it," said Paula stoutly.

"Perhaps you'll tell me how you came to know it!" said Mirabel viciously.

"Yes," said Paula, "I will tell you. Something you said the other day made me suspect it, so I had the registers at Somerset House searched, and there the entry of your marriage was, sure enough!"

"And who did you employ to search the registers?" asked Mirabel, still in the same tones.

"There's a proper functionary for the purpose," said Paula.

"Who has prying and spying as his perquisites!"

"Yes, I suppose a man has to pry when he's consulting hundreds of thousands of entries," said Paula coolly. "He wouldn't be any good for his job if he didn't!"

"Hm! A nice job!"

"There's no harm in the job, Mirabel. If you were to inherit a lot of money, and had to prove your father and mother's marriage to do it, you'd be glad enough to benefit by it—in fact, I don't suppose that when the time comes you will be allowed to inherit the Douglas titles and estates without your lawyers doing the very same thing! And, at all events, none of your descendants could ever be Earls of Douglas unless your marriage-entry could be found there, by some 'prying functionary'!"

"I suppose not," said Mirabel wearily. "But it isn't nice, is it?"

"I don't see anything nasty about it," said Paula, conscious all the time that she had been quite mean in the way she had ferreted Mirabel's secret.

"Well, if you did find out, I don't see why you need have told my cousins about it! Surely you could have had enough fun out of it by gossiping with Oliver over my misfortunes?"

"I didn't want to gossip with anybody, Mirabel—I wanted to make you live with your husband. And it was no good talking to him about it, with that view, when he had promised never to approach you on the subject. I had to talk to Lord and Lady Douglas about it, because they were the only people who could help!"

"Well, it won't help: I don't mean to listen to anybody! And, Paula—" she continued.

"What?"

"I must ask you to promise never to mention the subject to me."

"I shan't do anything of the kind," said Paula. "I shall make a point of urging you, whenever I get a chance!"

Mirabel was furious, but for the first time in the whole episode behaved like a lady; she did not say to Paula, "Well, then, you must find some other place to live;" she reflected that it would be a gross injustice, and might be a heavy financial blow to Paula, if she was suddenly turned out of the place where she had been invited to make her home.

"Well, if you won't promise," she said, "let me entreat you not to do it, because I warn you that it will always put me into the vilest temper."

Paula was so accustomed to putting people into tempers and defying them, that she did not feel at all perturbed, though her home might have been concerned. What is more, she did urge Mirabel, in season and out of season, to make it up with her husband, with the result that, although there was no danger of her being turned out of the house, they were hardly on speaking terms with each other.

Paula was not much distressed. If only she was firm, she argued to herself, Mirabel must come round. There would be no need for Mirabel to acknowledge herself in the wrong; she could just, one day, let her defence break down before Oliver. In the interval, Paula conducted herself like any other

Scotswoman who is buoyed up with the idea that righteousness is on her side. The less she saw of Mirabel, the better it was for reviving neglected friendships. She had seen so much of her friends in the old days that she was bound to neglect a few of them when she was wrapped up with Mirabel. Therefore, when Mirabel was a closed book she went and looked up these forgotten friends, and often had to drink tea at two or three places in one afternoon.

But it was very different for Mirabel. With her marriage oppressing her like a nightmare, and the Douglasses and Paula against her—not caring to see the Douglasses, and hardly speaking to Paula, she felt absolutely desolate. She literally lost all desire to live. Her appetite and her strength ebbed away, as her mother's had when she discovered her father's infidelity.

In a November of unprecedented severity she succumbed to the draughts of the theatre, and contracted a cold upon her lungs, which was so severe that she could not sing, and had perforce to give up her part in the last nights of the piece.

She was glad to be confined to indoors at Bolingbroke House, glad of any excuse not to have to go to the Douglasses' house and confront their pressure, and the generous forbearance of Oliver.

How she could have enjoyed the freedom to be at home, if Paula had not been in the enemy's camp !

Mirabel did not take to her bed. The one pleasure in life which she had left was the sensation that she was at last able to idle about her home all the day and all the evening, without having to prepare at half-past five for that colossal effort. Never, since she had assumed possession of her delightful Georgian house, had she been able to feel the sweets of home and the sweets of liberty combined.

She would not have sent for a doctor. Paula sent for him on her own authority, to make him prohibit her going to the theatre, and to get his report for Old Mac.

Once in the house, he perceived and insisted on the seriousness of the case. Except in resisting his orders that she should go to bed, Mirabel was docile enough in carrying out instructions. The one thing she would not do was to try to get better, though she took his medicines. The house had central heating, but no more exposure to draughts was necessary to sow the seeds of death in her system ; it was a

struggle between pneumonia and vitality, and she would not take a hand in the game.

Oliver heard about her condition from the report that went to the theatre, and was gravely alarmed. He at once came round to see her, though he had been little in the house since his return from France. She liked their meetings to take place at Lady Douglas's, because there it was for her to terminate them, and she could not tolerate much of his company now.

A wife whose husband has lost his leg, and gained such distinction in battle, and shows her the chivalry of a Sidney or a Bayard, if she has one spark of worth left in her, cannot help despising herself when she treats him like a man who has made an unsuccessful proposal of marriage, and finds his intimacy as a friend curtailed by his dismissal as a lover.

Oliver was no longer wearing his uniform. Officers who are so permanently disabled that they cannot go back to the front, do not wear their uniforms. This, combined with the activity which a perfect artificial limb afforded him, might have damaged him a little in her eyes.

Their meetings were cheerless, in spite of the cheeriness with which he made a point of entering the room where she was. He found her docile rather than friendly—perhaps she was afraid that friendliness might affect her resolution ; Jeffreys must have noticed that Paula, who had formerly made a point of never leaving them alone, was now seldom present when they were together, which was because she was conscious of a tendency to do, in her anxiety to help, exactly the things which had the worst effect on Mirabel.

Oliver was largely occupied with anxiety about Mirabel's health. Mirabel knew that what he advised was right ; she could not help being aware of his anxiety. But she would not take his advice, because she had no wish to live, and least of all did she wish to be beholden to him for living. When they were not talking about her health, almost the only thing which she allowed him to talk about was the theatre.

On account of her illness there could be no question of including Mirabel in the new piece, and several of the chief male actors in "Mary, Queen of Scots," were at the front and one had perished. So Gray had to fall back on a *Babylon* piece of the old type—"The Uniform Girl,"

with Guinevere Jones as leading lady. For one thing, it was more within Old Mac's scope. Give him anything within stereotyped lines, and he would do it in the best style. But "Mary, Queen of Scots," one of the greatest successes the *Babylon* had ever had, was entirely over his head ; he had prophesied nothing but disaster for it.

Hearing all the gossip about the rehearsal amused Mirabel, and she looked more kindly at Oliver for a moment when he told her with genuine concern that he could not have one of his new romantic musical comedies without her.

He was pitifully careful not to let her perceive that he saw how changed she was, not so much in health as in disposition. He treated her just as if she was the old Mirabel, so full of Italian *esprit*. Above all, he dreaded that she should see him wince when he heard one of her hollow coughs.

None the less, her resentment would not let her receive him in any way but as a duty owed to a wounded friend. Except when she was guarding herself against the pressure of Paula and the Douglasses, she never thought of him as a husband, and every time he saw her she was so much the thinner and weaker.

CHAPTER LX

DR. CANTELUPE TAKES MIRABEL TO TASK

THE most difficult person she found to deal with was Dr. Cantelupe, who, in one of the frequent calls he paid upon Paula, found only Mirabel at home.

He came in holding his lower lip between his forefinger and thumb, a trick he had when he was thinking, or a little disconcerted. He feared that Mirabel would say something about his attentions to Paula, who admired his compositions as sincerely as he admired her novels, and was blind to the humours of his appearance—his rather Hogarthian face, his pedantic manner, his alternative fits, or combinations of untidiness and smartness. What were they in a man who was a composer of genius, and had a talent for bringing out musical gifts which bade fair to make the Royal Lyceum the rival of the Royal College and Royal Academy of Music ?

" Well, Miss Douglas—I suppose I must call you Miss Douglas ? "

"No, Mirabel, if you like," she said, with sly sweetness.

"I don't mean that . . . how are you getting on with . . . you know who I mean?"

"Very well, thank you" (which was not strictly true).

"I thought so! I hear very good accounts of him from our people. The general impression is that he has completely given up the affairs which made him so notorious, and is behaving as well as a married man in his rather peculiar circumstances could possibly behave."

Mirabel was inwardly very much annoyed by this inquisitiveness about her husband's behaviour. What did it matter to all these people? It was her affair, and what had they to do with her affairs? Nevertheless, as Dr. Cantelupe had been a friend in need, she did not intend to let herself be annoyed with him, and said:

"Oliver has quite turned over the leaf. He's a very good husband. I have nothing to complain of."

"Then why don't you acknowledge your marriage and let him live here?" he asked, without in the least intending to counter what she had said, but only to offer her fatherly counsel on the advisability of putting an end to the undesirable conditions which she had imposed upon her husband—if she got on with him so well.

"I don't mean to live with him anywhere. I let him come to see me here as often as he likes."

"Well, I think you ought to live with him, Miss Douglas. And if you don't want to live with him here, I should give up this place altogether, and go and live with him at his flat. This divided life is a false existence for a man and wife—believe me, it is! I am sure of it, though I have never married myself."

"Well, I hope you'll practise what you preach when you are married," she said, so significantly that she covered the poor man with confusion, and momentarily diverted his blundering overtures.

"If I am successful in my desires," he stammered out, "I shan't fall into the trap of leaving my wife in the country—you are quite countrified here with your garden, Miss Douglas—all the week, while I am earning our bread and butter. I shall want to have her society to cheer me and spur me on. Are you satisfied with your life as it is?"

"Very far from it," she said, "but I don't see any way out of it."

"Oh, it must be quite simple! I am sure that Mr. Gray would be willing to abrogate this absurd agreement if you asked him. And since, except when rehearsals are on, he could very well manage all that he has to do in the theatre in two or three hours in the morning, and an occasional hour after lunch, there would be no reason why he should not live here."

"I shouldn't like to ask him," said Mirabel, in savage irony. She wondered how many more pin-pricks this innocent was going to inflict on her.

"May I speak to him about it?" he pleaded, for he was fond as well as proud of his famous and beautiful pupil. "I don't think he'd mind; he'd remember that I acted, as I might say, *in loco parentis*, when he broached the subject of the marriage to you. And I'm a much older man. I'll do it with pleasure. I think I know how to put it to him."

"I should be exceedingly angry if you did, old friend. I know that you mean most awfully well, but I like to manage my affairs for myself."

"Well, I'll say no more about it," he said, wishing her an affectionate good-bye, to show how gladly he would have done it for her. But as he stepped out along the river-walk to catch the 'bus at Hammersmith Bridge, he said to himself: "What a stupid girl, to be sure!" not knowing what force his words had.

CHAPTER LXI

THE DOUGLAS TRAGEDY

LORD DOUGLAS was still at Lanarkshire House. He did not suffer the old annoyances of home, because the idle women who used to hang round his wife were mostly doing war-work or war-play. And it was convenient for him, because he had collected all the horses which were to be collected in his part of Sussex, and had been transferred to inspecting the work at the score or two of remount depots which were grouped round London; for these it was most convenient for him to live in London itself. So, as he had Gray to talk shop to, he established himself at Lanark-

shire House, and wondered how he could have "bachelored" so long at The Hermitage, when he had such a lovely and charming wife to "mother" him at home.

He was so tired when he came into dinner—he had often ridden sixty horses in the day—that, though he drank very little except the champagne he took with the meal, he liked to spend a long time over his after-dinner cigar, before he left the table. Lady Douglas, on the other hand, was always impatient to leave the table, receptions having been the business of her evenings, so the two men had good opportunities for a talk before they joined her.

Mirabel was their ordinary topic of conversation, and caused them more and more uneasiness. She was obviously wasting away, and the hopes of the Douglas succession were growing faint.

Gray was even sorrier for Lord Douglas than for himself. It was such a cruel combination of misfortunes, that he should lose his only son, and that out of his son's death should arise the mental disorder which was going to make the only other heir die any day without issue.

He racked and racked his brains for a remedy, with no result, till, as a last resort, he determined to see if Mirabel might be induced to live, supposing that she could divorce him.

"I'm inclined to think that it might work," he said to Lord Douglas.

"Not unless she is suffering from madness."

"I believe that it is hysteria more than anything else."

"Well, if it is hysteria, how is she to manage the divorce? And why should you, who are so anxious for the restitution of conjugal relations, and have been such a good husband to her—why should you be sacrificed?"

"Well, if it would save her life, and give you the chance of heirs, I should not grudge the sacrifice," said Gray. "It's about the only thing that I can do in the way of sacrifice, now that I am laid on the shelf."

"I don't see that anyone would be benefited by it except me," said The Douglas. "And while I live there will be an Earl of Douglas, and in the place, where I go to, there will be no heirs for an obvious reason, and I imagine that there will be no information there as to whether the Earldom of Douglas exists or not. Besides, how could it be managed if

you did not want to do it? No court would give her a divorce against you, Oliver, after the life that you've led since you met her!"

"Oh, that part of it is quite simple! I have not been owner-manager of the *Babylon Theatre* for several years without knowing how divorces can be arranged! If you're lucky, and can find out when there is a judge ready to take your case, it takes very little more than the six months necessary for making a *decree nisi* absolute."

"How is it managed?" asked Lord Douglas, very interested, not because he had the slightest taste for unsavoury details, but because he considered that it would tend to elevate the Aristocracy very much if Peers who made idiotic marriages with chorus-girls, when they were hardly more than boys, were able to divorce them, and make a marriage which suited their station when they arrived at years of discretion. He had a concrete example before him in the person of his dead son. He had felt almost certain that Archie, up to the time when he met Mirabel, would marry some dreadful woman from musical comedy or the music-halls—to be the ancestress of future Earls of Douglas, unless there was a divorce before she had a son! Therefore he asked: "How is it managed?"

Gray explained to him the smooth working of the legal fiction for divorce by arrangement.

"That is how the infidelity is established," he said, "and in my case it would be easy to prove desertion, because Mirabel would not allow me to live with her after the first month, and until I joined the Army I lived in my flat over the *Babylon Theatre*, while she lived at Bolingbroke House. Any lawyer could prove desertion on that. The judge pronounces a *decree nisi*, and after six months makes it *absolute*, unless the business has been managed with such scandalous carelessness that the King's Proctor smells a rat and intervenes. It would be easy for me to afford Mirabel the chance of getting rid of me in that way."

"She'd never do it! I sincerely trust she'd never do it, though all my hopes of heirs depend on it!"

"I'm not so sure. This thing is more than an obsession with her now. It's a hallucination. She might regard it as a sacrifice to the memory of Archie."

"Impossible!"

"I'm not sure. And as she will die if it is not done, and kill both our hopes, we might give it a chance. I shall still be able to see her at the theatre."

"I would not be a party to such a thing—such a disgraceful thing, Oliver!"

"I'm sorry. I would do anything to save Mirabel's life."

* * * * *

That night, when they joined Lady Douglas, they found Paula with her. Gray, full of his scheme to save Mirabel's life, took Paula aside, and explained the scheme to her.

"I believe that she'd do it in the state that she is in. But 'what price you,' poor Oliver?"

"I'd rather that than see her die by inches, Paula!"

"And so would I, though she does not deserve anything!"

"Don't be offended, Paula, if I ask you something. . . ."

"I don't think you're very likely to say anything that would offend me! But if you do offend me, I'll forgive you, because I want to hear what you've got to say."

"Well, will you . . . no, I can't say it!"

"Will I sound her, you mean? Oliver, when you first came to Bolingbroke House, this is the sort of thing I should have expected you to say to me, and I could have killed you for it. Now I think that you deserve a V.C. for offering it! I will do what I can. It may be a dead frost, or my heart may fail me. But hope for the best."

"Don't let *them* know," he said, glancing towards their hosts. "I told Lord Douglas that I was willing to do it, and he would not listen to me."

At breakfast the next morning, when they took their newspapers to the easy-chairs on each side of the fireplace, Paula, who had lain awake all night, thinking how she should broach the subject, said quite suddenly to Mirabel: "I saw Oliver last night. He has offered to give you your freedom."

"Offered to give me my freedom?" echoed Mirabel, with the old flush coming into her wasted face, and a smile that bespoke happiness only too eloquently. "Oh, how will he do it?"

"By letting you divorce him, of course!"

"But how could I divorce him? Much as I want to be free, I am convinced that Oliver has been faithful to me, and it is ludicrous to think of cruelty in connection with him!"

" He says that unless either of you put in your marriage-contract as evidence, the law would presume desertion on the fact that after a month of marriage he lived in his flat over the theatre, while you were living at Hammersmith, until he went into the Army ; and to prove infidelity . . . "

" Infidelity ?—that would be impossible."

Paula repeated Gray's explanation.

" And is he willing to do this for me ? "

" Yes," said Paula.

" I am not worthy of it ! "

" Then why do you let him do it ? "

An instant change came over Mirabel. Once more she grew hard, and the hallucination manifested itself. Paula was quite right in supposing that she would connect it with Archie's memory. Mirabel was willing ; she was more than willing ; she was once more capable of a desire.

Paula went to see Oliver Gray that night, to announce the success of her ignoble mission, and like the brave man that war had proved him, he prepared to go through with it.

On the very next morning he took a taxi to the theatre. He had telephoned to Czarto Bilinsky, the divorce lawyer, to meet him at his flat ; he did not wish to go to the laboratory of that unsavoury alchemist, and he could not ask him to Lanarkshire House. He did not use the car which Lord Douglas had put at his disposal. Chauffeurs are as sharp as lawyers.

When he got out of the taxi, he found a small crowd collected round the steps of the theatre.

" What is the matter ? " he asked, and they pointed out a girl with a basket of white feathers, who was presenting one with insulting words to every man of the military age who passed without either a uniform or a war-worker's badge.

Seeing a tall young man, something of a Johnny, as it seemed by the distinction with which he dressed, alight from a taxi and prepare to enter the theatre, which had the credit of being such a haunt of dissipation, she darted towards him, and pushed a white feather into his buttonhole.

" There ! " she said. " I hope that will make you sufficiently ashamed of yourself to go and do your duty with the colours ! "

Gray's commissionaire came down the steps to drive her away.

"Leave her alone," said Gray—"or, rather, leave her to me!" He was intensely annoyed at the situation. He felt so ridiculous. Here was he, who had been disabled for life by one of the most heroic actions of the war, being given a white feather in the most insulting way outside his own theatre, because he had not so much as a special constable's badge to put on the lapel of his civilian overcoat. But, in common parlance, "his monkey was up," and he determined to try and make her ridiculous also.

"Madam," he said, "do you want to know why I am not doing my duty with the colours?"

"Yes, I do," she said arrogantly, thinking that she had at last shamed a man into recruiting by her caddish trick.

"Then will you do me the honour of feeling my leg?"

The crowd set up a roar of laughter—not very nice laughter.

"Silence!" he cried. "I mean what I say. Will you feel my leg—my left leg?"

She coloured angrily.

"You can get the policeman to do it, if you are ready to believe what he says!"

"Let the bobby do it, Miss!" cried the crowd, changing its tone; "'e's making you a fair offer!"

The policeman did not wait for her orders. He made his way to Gray, and said, in his "move on" voice: "What are you talking about your leg for?"

"Feel it and see," said Gray.

The policeman, not without roughness, felt it; something puzzled him; he felt it again, more gently and carefully. Then he looked up to the lady of the white feathers, and said: "Artifishul! You've been wasting yourself on a cove with a wooden leg!"

Seeing a policeman pinching his master's leg, the commissionaire came running down the steps again, to see if he needed his assistance.

"No, I'm all right, Simmonds, thank you," said Gray, going up the steps and into the theatre.

"'Oo is 'e?" asked the policeman of the commissionaire when Gray had gone in.

"Don't you know him?" said the commissionaire, as if

it was impossible for anybody not to know so famous a person.

"No," said the policeman, "or I shouldn't 'ave arst you!"

"That's Lieutenant Gray, what's going to 'ave a Victoria Cross, and the owner of this theatre!"

"Go 'ome, Mother Goose," said the policeman, to the lady with the feathers, "before you puts yer foot in it any wuss!"

CHAPTER LXII

HOW TARA TRELOAR TOOK THE DIVORCE INTO HER OWN HANDS

A S Gray went into the theatre towards Old Mac's office, whom should he meet coming down the stairs but his last leading lady before Mirabel—Tara Treloar.

"Hullo, Tara, what are you doing over here?" he asked.

"A divorce." Tara could be very laconic.

"A divorce?"

"Yes, I want to marry again, and so does Snooker."

Snooker (christened Seneca) Claflin was the American Variety Syndicate promoter, who had lured her away from the *Babylon* to act for his "combine." He had taken the precaution of marrying her, so that she should not give him the slip, directly she got over there.

This marriage had worn out long ago, because it meant nothing else; but the parties, whose lives were not affected by the tie, had not troubled to dissolve it, until the occasion arose for Snooker to go through the ceremony again for a business purpose.

This in a nutshell was what Tara told Gray when he asked her into his office for a chat.

The irony entered his soul. Here was he, who had been a Galahad since he first became engaged, about to give up his dearest possession and desire in the faint hope of saving Mirabel's life, and the Douglas succession for another; while Tara, who had made marriage a pawn in a game, was now going to play a fresh marriage as a fresh pawn, for a new lease of profit or pleasure—the latter, she told him.

"I'm going to marry the real thing this time, not a filthy cad like Snooker!"

Snooker's solitary merit appeared to have been that he was accommodating about everything but business. Now business necessitated a new marriage on his part—in England, and as he could not marry again in England without getting an English divorce, he had offered Tara a considerable sum to go to England and be divorced. It was better that *she* should be divorced, though there was ample proof for either, because it simplified matters to have the woman, for whom mere infidelity was sufficient cause, divorced.

"Who are you going to marry when you've got your divorce?" asked Gray.

"I don't know," she said. "There'll be plenty want to do it when they know that I'm in the market again."

"In the market again!" Gray shuddered. From this point of view, in a few months he would be in the market again—a target, doubtless, for all the Taras, if they found out that he had been divorced by a musical-comedy actress in his own employ!

Tara, to his surprise, had not degenerated. Her *liaison* had been with a leading Democrat politician who might have aspired to the Presidency but for his domestic record, and his force had mesmerized her.

"And how are you getting on, old dear?" she asked.
"Was your marriage a success?"

Your marriage! His secret was known in the theatre then, for she could not have heard it in America!

She had heard it in the theatre—not from the faithful Maccabaeus, he might be sure. It was one of the Chorus whom she had met going into his office who had told her. Tara had been to Old Mac to try and get a part in the new piece, but found all the principal parts filled. In any case, he would not have dared to suggest her name to Gray, after her breaking her former contract, though she would have done the leading lady in "The Uniform Girl" far better than Guinevere Jones, whose humour was ponderous.

Gray paused before he spoke again. Should he tell Tara? Then he grasped the nettle. If it was his business to be divorced for infidelity, coupled with desertion, it was not a time to be squeamish about appearances. The more they were against him, the easier the divorce would be.

"We can't get on, Tara," he blurted out. "I'm going to let her divorce me."

"And does she want to?"

"Yes."

"Silly fool!" she said. "I wish I'd never left you! I've never met such a good 'un since!"

"Thank you, Tara, for the character you give me!" he said bitterly.

"Well, you are a good 'un, Oliver—quite straight in the grain, if a little giddy!"

"I'm not very giddy now, Tara, I'm afraid."

"It seems not. Well, can't I help you, old dear?"

"I don't see how."

"Well, I could be the lady if I couldn't do anything else! Snooker wouldn't care; so long as he can 'off' the marriage, he isn't particular about the 'enters' and 'exits'!"

"It's very generous of you, Tara, but I couldn't let you drag yourself through the mire to save me."

"Oh, skittles! I see you're just as much of a mug as ever! I shall have to do the job for you."

"You'll do nothing of the sort!"

"You can't prevent me! You may spoil what I'm going to do by your muggishness, but you can't stop my doing it, if I want to. And I do want to, because you're a jolly good sort. And a woman of sense can manage these things so much better than a man can."

"What are you going to do?" he asked, still unconvinced.

"That's my affair," she said. "But if you'll give me the name of your lawyer, you needn't do another thing except refuse to defend the case. The evidence will be all right."

"How shall I know?" asked Gray.

"By waiting till your lawyer tells you."

Very reluctantly he gave her the name—Czarto Bilinsky, 9, Elysian Chambers, Holborn.

"Oh, old Billy! He knows me! He'll be glad to work with somebody who understands what she's doing. Will you leave it to me, Oliver?" she asked, suddenly changing her manner for that of a lady. "I want to spare you the humiliation of all this—this sort of thing doesn't mean so much to Tara Clafin as it does to you."

"I don't see how I can, Tara. I should be such a bounder if I let you!"

" My dear boy, it isn't a matter of your letting me—I'm going to do it whether you let me or not ! It's a question of whether you're going to spoil my well-meant efforts with your clumsy conscience ! If you do that, I shall have done what I do for nothing, and you'll have to do it all again for yourself. A man like you has to be protected from himself, Oliver ! "

" Very well, Tara, I'll let you. I know I'm a bounder to let you, but I can't see how I'm to go through with this thing at all without being a bounder ! It's an impossible position, having to accuse oneself of a dishonour one has not committed, in order to rob oneself of one's greatest treasure ! "

" I know what I should like to do to Miss Mirabel Douglas ! " said Tara.

He did not ask her, but she did not wait to be asked.
" I'd like to marry her to Snooker ! "

CHAPTER LXIII

HOW MIRABEL RECEIVED THE DIVORCE PAPERS

IN due time Mirabel received from Mr. Czarto Bilinsky the papers for an action for divorce, brought by Mrs. John Gray, commonly known as Mrs. Oliver Gray, Junior (which had not once happened), against Mr. John Gray, commonly known as Oliver Gray, Junior, and Mrs. Snooker Clafin.

Paula, coming into the room, found Mirabel with more energy than she had shown for weeks.

" Do you see these, Paula ? " she cried, pushing the papers over to her.

" Yes, " said Paula, " they seem to be the papers for your divorce."

" Yes, but do you see who the woman in the action is ? "

" Well, you are one woman, and the other is your predecessor as leading lady at the *Babylon*, Miss Tara Treloar."

" It's infamous ! " said Mirabel.

" Well, did you expect a divorce-case trumped up to let you get out of your vows and contracts to be anything else ? "

"I didn't expect to have that woman associated with it," said Mirabel sullenly.

"You had no right to expect anything," said Paula, "except that Oliver would keep his word in going through this miserable business for your sake."

"What am I to do?" asked Mirabel desperately.

"I don't see what you can do, except bring the action! You wanted it brought, and I don't see why you should hesitate when you find that there's more reason for bringing it than you thought!"

Paula did not think there was more reason, but did not mean to spare Mirabel.

"If he made her his leading lady as well, that would be the last straw!"

"I expect he will!" said Paula grimly. "As I remember her, she'd be about the best woman he could get for the job!"

"Paula!" cried Mirabel, "you're hateful!"

"No, I'm not, but you'll have to accustom yourself to hearing the truth, if you're going to lose Oliver. Nobody else is going to consider your feelings as he has done."

The word "lose" was like a stab. Why had not Paula said "get rid of" Oliver? It was she, Mirabel, who was putting an end to the connection. Oliver was not trying to get out of it. She was not "losing" him.

"When's the case coming on?" asked Paula.

"In about ten days."

"Then in less than a fortnight you'll be a free woman! These cases don't take any time when they're properly managed—that's what Mr. Bilinsky said when he came to see you. You had been lying down, and while you were putting your dress on, I had a talk with him."

"You, Paula? What do you mean by meddling in my affairs?"

"I wanted to help," said Paula. She did not mention whom she wanted to help.

"And what else did Mr. Bilinsky say to you?"

"He said that these things, if they're properly managed, sometimes take less than half an hour to hear, and then presently you get a decree dissolving the marriage, though it is only a *nisi prius*—which I suppose mean *on appro.*—and

has to be confirmed, *made absolute*, I think he called it, six months later."

"I wish it hadn't been that Tara Treloar!" whined Mirabel.

"It doesn't matter to you who it is, so long as you get your divorce," said Paula.

"It doesn't matter to me? Oh, Paula, are you a woman?"

"That's a question I've often thought of asking you, Mirabel!"

CHAPTER LXIV

HOW OLIVER AND MIRABEL GRAY RECEIVED THEIR DIVORCE

THE case had come before the judge, and, in the experienced hands of Mr. Bilinsky, aided by such a humourist in the rôle of co-respondent as Miss Tara Treloar, had not occupied an hour, all told.

Gray, as he had promised, made no defence, and being very popular with the newspapers, for his uniform courtesy to their representatives, and for the part he took in increasing the mirth of nations, as well as for his liberality in advertising, the case was unaccountably lost sight of in the reports.

In due time Mirabel received the notice of the divorce, with the intimation of when, if no reasons against it were proved in the interval, it would be *made absolute*.

One troublesome question with reference to it did not arise—whether she should call herself by her maiden or her married name, because, except during her honeymoon in Cornwall, she had never called herself anything but Miss Douglas. Paula's remark upon the convenience of this let loose the flood.

"I don't see how I've helped myself!" said Mirabel mournfully.

"Nor do I!" said Paula. "I can't think how anybody could have been so inexpressibly foolish!"

"What right have you to say that?"

"Because you've got a divorce which you didn't want."

"Didn't want?" cried Mirabel fiercely.

"No, you're regretting it now, when you've only had it five minutes!"

"I did want it! How could I go on living with a monster, who went back to that Treloar woman at the very first moment that he was able?"

"You didn't live with him!" said Paula. "And if he did go back to his Tara, I should like to know who sent him!"

"I suppose you mean that I drove him to it?"

"Well, he certainly didn't want it!"

"He need not have chosen that woman!" said Mirabel inconsequently.

"Do you suppose that he had a dozen or a hundred accomplices in guilt to take his choice from?" asked the merciless Paula.

"No, I don't! But still . . . he needn't have taken her!"

"Did you think he was going to invent a woman for the case?" pursued Paula. "If he had to commit a sin for your sake, wasn't it natural—wasn't it better that he should have a relapse, instead of beginning a fresh affair?"

"No, it wasn't!" said Mirabel. "It was brutal of him! He might have known that he was . . . behaving in the worst way that he possibly could!"

"Well, I don't think you can blame him! You ought to be quite satisfied to have got all you want."

"But I haven't got all I want!" whined Mirabel. "I've lost Oliver, and that woman's got him!"

"Lost!" said Paula. "When you throw a thing away, anybody may pick it up."

"Oh, don't sit there mocking me, please! I'm a miserable woman!"

"And I should like to see you a good deal more miserable! You've thoroughly deserved it! I think you've behaved rottenly!"

"Honestly, Paula?" asked Mirabel, with something of her old lucidity.

"Yes, honestly. I never was so disappointed with anybody!"

Mirabel did not say another word, but went straight upstairs and threw herself on her bed and cried. She did not even remember how interested the servants would be in the documents which granted her a divorce.

But they did not escape Paula's notice. She carried them off for safe-keeping—and, it must be added, for perusal.

Meanwhile, the innocent cause of the mischief remained quite ignorant that he had scored a point. He, too, had received a notice of the divorce, and he felt inclined to cut his throat. He had lost a pearl of so great price, as far as he could judge, without having committed a single fault ! For if his compelling her to marry him was the cause of her pining for her freedom, before they had been married two years, he might also reflect that, if he had not compelled her, she never would have been his wife at all. This marriage, evidently, had not been made in heaven !

Gray received his notice by the same post, and handed it over to Lord Douglas as soon as they were left alone.

" Well, I call it rotten !" said The Douglas. " She shall never come into any house of mine again, until she comes into the whole lot at my death ! I've done with her ! "

" Lord Douglas," said Gray, " as a favour to me, I beg you not to make any difference to her. As this decree has built an unscalable wall between her and me, she will more than ever stand in need of your companionship and guidance, if she is not to come to grief. You've got to take my place."

" But you've never been allowed to take it yourself !" said Lord Douglas.

" I know I haven't, yet I felt as if I had been a sort of reserve."

" Well, Oliver, all I can say is that if the meek are going to inherit the earth, you ought to have a look in ! "

After this they were silent for a little, and then Oliver said : " Shall I show this *Decree Nisi* to Lady Douglas when she comes down ? "

" Of course. She looks upon you as a son, and she'll expect it, just as she would have expected it from Archie. She won't have anything more to do with Mirabel, even if I do. She hates it—having all this horrible divorce-court business dragged in for nothing. She considers it a disgrace to the Douglases. She thinks Mirabel must be mad, and doesn't hesitate to say so."

" Well, obsessions may be madness. I'm quite sure that Mirabel considers herself one of the noble army of Master-mans."

" If you mean martyrs," said Lord Douglas, " she's no more a martyr than the bucking horses which I shall have to reject this morning—she's a bucker, that's what she is ! I

wonder if the car's here? It's time for me to be off to the Dollis Hill depot."

When Oliver showed the decree to Lady Douglas, she said, "What a shame! There ought to be a law against allowing such things!"

"But, my dear Lady D., it was I who thought of getting the divorce, and, if there had been such a law, I shouldn't have got it."

"Mirabel is hateful!" she said. "I'm glad that she's no cousin of mine!"

"Don't let's think of it like that. If she hadn't got a divorce, I'm sure that she would have died, and then the Douglas Earldom would have come to an end. Now, as she's got rid of me. . . ."

"She may condescend to live!" said Lady Douglas.

"And have children! It's much more important that she should have children than that I should have my conjugal rights, as the law calls them."

"I am sure I hope she won't have any. I think it is better that the Earls of Douglas should die out than that they should be like her. There are half a dozen other Douglas peerages to keep the name from dying out."

"Lord Douglas does not think so. He did not see any reason, he said, why I should sacrifice myself for the Douglas Earldom, but I could see that he thought it a terrible thing that it should die out without an effort being made to maintain it."

"Just like a man!" said Lady Douglas, who, when she was not warped by anger, thought that the world ought to come to an end before the Earldom of Douglas.

A little later Paula came in. There was no secret in the family about the divorce, though the secret about the marriage had died hard. And she opened fire at once, before she had finished shaking hands. She was afraid to be serious.

"I suppose you got your circular this morning, Oliver?"

"Oh, yes, we're discussing it at the present moment."

"It's a nice thing to have in a decent family, isn't it?" said Lady Douglas, still very angry.

Gray did not think himself entitled to express an opinion, as he had brought it on the family, so it fell to Paula to say, "It might have been worse."

To her surprise, Lady Douglas said, "Yes, it might have

been Archie!—poor boy! he might have fallen a victim to some designing person!"

"I am afraid that I was the designing person in this case," said Gray.

"Don't be silly, Oliver!" said the Countess. "As you did not know who she was, all the worldly advantages were on your side."

"But you can't get out of the fact that I was the one who had to be divorced."

* * * * *

Soon after this he went back to live at the flat, so that there might be no check on the hours of rehearsal—not, as Mirabel feared, when she heard of it—to renew his intimacy with Tara.

* * * * *

No one outside of the parties immediately concerned heard of the divorce. Tara, though Mirabel had not the consolation of knowing it, returned to America by the first boat after the pronunciation of a *Decree Nisi*, which gave Snooker his divorce on the same evidence which had given Mirabel hers.

But Gray and Mirabel were spared the degradation of knowing that he had been the co-respondent in *Clafin v. Clafin and Another*. Tara had not thought it worth mentioning to him. He had made her removing herself from his path as soon as possible a condition of accepting her help; and she still had enough womanliness left to understand his motives, and respect them.

This being the case, to her unsophisticated mind it seemed that the best way to please him was to make the same evidence do for Snooker to get his freedom, which would allow her to return to America. The question of domicile while the *decree* was being made *absolute* did not worry her or Snooker in the least.

CHAPTER LXV

DR. CANTELUPE'S DILEMMA

WHEN Paula got back to Bolingbroke House, and found Dr. Cantelupe there, she naturally concluded that he had read some announcement about it in the newspapers, and come to offer his condolences, or, if he had sufficient backbone, his censure. It must be for that reason that this was one of his smart days. There were two Dr. Cantelupes, one which was shaved by a barber and wore an ultra-fashionable morning-coat, a tie wound twice round a very tall collar, and an ultra-shiny silk hat at an angle. The other often forgot to shave, and wore an old velvet jacket, a butterfly tie, and a soft felt hat.

And this was the Dr. Cantelupe who had won Paula's heart, because this was the student and teacher, who loved the byways of travel, and was becoming a lever in London's music.

"Good morning, Miss Maitland," he said. He had not yet ventured to call her Paula, though he was dreaming dreams.

"Good morning, Dr. Cantelupe. It's a most painful business you've come about!"

He looked terribly taken aback. His cheeks, which a moment ago had been round and laughing, lengthened ominously, and he looked so shy and awkward, that Paula said quickly, "After all, it's nothing to us, is it?"

"Nothing to us, Miss Maitland? I don't think I understand you."

"Well, I suppose we are indirectly affected—I am, at any rate—and it's really better for me that things should remain as they are."

Dr. Cantelupe took up his hat, and prepared to rush out of the room.

"Why, what's the matter, Dr. Cantelupe? You can't be so vitally affected by Mirabel's divorcing Oliver?"

It was the first he had heard of it. His look showed that he was inexpressibly shocked. An idea flashed through Paula's brain, and she stammered out, "You did not enter-

tain—any feelings—warmer than those which have appeared—for Mirry, did you ? ”

“ I, my dear young lady ? No. That is a matter which I hope to clear up to your satisfaction, and still more to my own satisfaction, this morning. But I had not heard of the divorce before, and it is, as you say, most painful. I thought you were referring to something else.”

Paula blushed so furiously that she could not even say : “ What else ? ” but waited helplessly for him to proceed.

“ The fact is, Miss Maitland—may I call you Paula ? ”

“ Oh, if that is all you came to ask, Dr. Cantelupe,” she said, recovering herself, “ I have not the slightest objection. I am on terms of Christian names with many of my old artist and author friends, and I shall be charmed to add you to their number.”

“ And you must call me Geoffrey ? ”

Paula smiled. “ I don’t think I can, while we’re in this house.”

“ What is the difficulty ? ” he asked disappointedly.

“ Well, the trouble is that our manservant is called Jeffreys, and he would always look intelligent when I said anything to you ! ”

“ Then, Paula,” he said desperately, achieving thereby what might have taken him hours of diplomacy, “ there is nothing for it but to take you away from here as soon as possible ! ”

Paula blushed again, and again waited helplessly for him to be more explicit.

“ I know I have no right to ask you—it is not as if the Lyceum were the College or the Academy. It is no kind of a position to offer you . . . I . . . I . . . I should not have asked you yet, if it had not been. . . . ” He broke off, quite unable to remember the reason which had seemed so cogent before he started.

“ I don’t see why you are apologizing, Geoffrey ! I don’t care a rap about your position ! And, in any case, the Lyceum is just as good as either of the others. And I’m not going to marry the Lyceum—I’m going to marry you ! ”

“ Do you mean . . . may I hope . . . that you will marry me ? You’re not joking, are you, Paula ? I can tell you that it’s a desperately serious matter for me ! ”

“ Of course I’m not, dear ! I would have married you six months ago, if you’d asked me ! ”

“ Six months off my life ! ” said the shy professor, with as fine an air as Baldassare Castiglione could have achieved.

So Paula thought ; her mind was running on Italy. The Lyceum was built in rather an Italian style, and she had already begun to picture its commonplace furniture and decorations giving way to something meagre and mediæval and Florentine.

CHAPTER LXVI

“ THE UNIFORM GIRL ” AT THE BABYLON

ARCHIE’S death had removed what might have been a check on Mirabel’s mad desire to get rid of her husband, for it had been a tradition with the Earls of Douglas that a certain estate in Lanarkshire, which brought in a great income from minerals, and a certain castle on the Douglas Water, a dignified residence with fine shootings, should be assigned to the heir, so that he should have a proper provision if the holder of the title quarrelled with him.

Therefore, when Archie died, these possessions passed to Mirabel, and she found her income trebled.

She was far too mournful to alter the style of her living. The first use she made of her new wealth was to send for Lewis and Lewis and ask them to arrange with Ticknor and Fields that no further sums should be paid to her on Gray’s behalf, and that an equitable sum should be fixed for the purchase of Bolingbroke House and its contents.

The latter Gray would not contemplate. They were Mirabel’s already, he said. As regards the former, he could not help himself, because she had instructed her bankers to refuse the money.

Nor was he more disposed to retract in the matter of her engagement.

For “ The Uniform Girl,” it was obviously necessary to give her leave of absence, because she had been too ill to rehearse, but for subsequent pieces, her lawyers were informed that, should her health permit of it, she would be held to the letter of the contract.

For Gray was still as deeply in love as ever with his beautiful, ungrateful and contumacious Mirabel, and had not, unless the law compelled him, the slightest intention of giving up the chance of seeing her for several hours each day, and having the authority of an employer over her, if he could not have the authority of a husband.

Mirabel, on her side, was distinctly relieved to find that if she recovered sufficiently to act again, Gray did not wish to terminate the contract. Lewis and Lewis feared that he would make it the subject of an action, since the marriage had been the consideration for Gray's agreeing to it, and they warned her that if the matter had to be settled by a jury, it was sure to go against her. It was obvious, in spite of their politeness, that they did not approve of the divorce. They had, of course, to be placed in possession of the situation. They were not, in point of fact, any better pleased with her desire to get a divorce than they were with the way in which it had been achieved. They could only account for Mirabel's allowing herself to be connected with such a proceeding as the result of a temporary mental aberration such as is responsible for most suicides.

After the chastening her spirit had received by Archie's death, and her wanton quarrel with Oliver, Mirabel honestly did feel a disposition "to devote her life to her art," and she meant to devote it so earnestly that Oliver should never repent of his decision to keep her on as his leading lady without raising the question of his legal obligation to do so.

The divorce had, as Oliver, reading her disposition with the eyes of love and constant intercourse, supposed it would have, a magical effect upon her health. By removing the source of her desire to commit suicide by letting herself die, her youth and vitality were enlisted on the side of her recovery, and almost instantly began to tell. She was soon out of danger and mending rapidly.

* * * * *

Weeks had passed. "The Uniform Girl" had been produced on Boxing Day, and was an undeniably greater success than a play like "Mary, Queen of Scots," would have been, produced at such a time, partly, no doubt, because

Oliver Gray, to stifle his regrets, had taken unusual pains with its production. The fun lay in the antics of girls suddenly pitchforked into every species of work for which men have worn uniforms. The phases treated were, of course, just those phases for which woman, by reason of her sex and skirts, is grotesquely unfit, and the pretty side was supplied by the anxiety of uniformed women to change from their khaki and dark-blue tunics, and trousery skirts, into lovely feminine garments the moment they were off duty—following in the footsteps of the British officer, with his time-honoured aversion to staying in uniform one minute longer than he is obliged.

On that first night, following his precedent, Gray had to pass from the ringing plaudits of the stage to the supper in the Zenobia Hall at the Restaurant—a very different spectacle from the great “Mary, Queen of Scots,” supper of two years ago. John Knox, Darnley, Bothwell and the Regent Moray, were fighting beside the hereditary allies of Scotland in Artois or Champagne, and the gentlest of them all, Rizzio, had already laid down his life for his country beneath the rugged cliffs which were once familiar to Leander. And the naughtier spirits of the Chorus, tiring of a soberer *Babylon*, had followed the Archies to Rouen, in any capacity they could.

The old riotous and risky chaff was replaced by a genuine outburst when Hughie Sprot, who had gone before at least six medical boards in his anxiety to get into the Army, all of which had rejected him for the fatuous short-sightedness which was the backbone of his inimitable business as a low comedian, being now senior member of the company, proposed the health of the Chief, who was once more in khaki, having got himself—through the faithful General Finch-Cocks—appointed Recruiting Officer for the Thames Embankment, with the local rank of Captain in the Royal Artillery.

He voiced the ardent feelings of everyone present when he said how glad they were to get back “part of our Chief” to preside over the destinies of the theatre, and this and future festive occasions.

“There are some of us,” he added regretfully, “who find it even harder to get there than he did to get back, and he had to leave a leg behind him.”

The meeting was really more united and enthusiastic than most *Babylon* first night suppers.

But this did not prevent Gray, when he went up to his own flat, after it was all over, feeling dull and depressed, for here he was, back at the old mill, with the two great episodes in his life, from which he had hoped so much, over.

Never again would he be at his Observing Post in the trenches, speaking quick, nervous orders down the telephone, as he saw his shells shattering a German position, or feeling again as he felt in that supreme moment when, with his own hand on the deserted machine-gun, and with his own keen eyes piercing the dusk, he was stemming the rush of half a battalion of Germans, and saving a British trench. And never again could he call Mirabel his, Mirabel, whom he had lost just when he discovered that the first son she bore to him, a nobody in family, would inherit one of the proudest titles in Europe, and a share in history possessed by no other family which has not held a throne. Since he had learned of Mirabel's being Lord Douglas's heir, he had read "*The History of the House of Douglas*," and it had thrilled him to think that he was to be allowed even a minor part in perpetuating such glory.

And now it had all passed away, like a sigh in the night, and with it the beautiful Mirabel—the Enchanted Princess, through whom it had all come! If only she had remained, the rest of the vision was welcome to perish, and the heiress of the Douglases to be changed back into a Cinderella in the kitchen.

But it had ended like a dream: and his own goodly heritage of wealth and power and popularity had lost all its value in his eyes.

CHAPTER LXVII

CAPTAIN JOHN GRAY, V.C.

FATE seemed to decree for him everything but what he desired. Soon after a fresh success had solidly established itself at his theatre, came the publication in the *Gazette* of the names of four new V.C.'s, one of whom was Lieut., with the local rank of Captain, John Gray, Royal Garrison Artillery, for the services set forth below:

"For conspicuous gallantry on September —th, 1915, at Givenchy, when every man in the trench in front of his Observation Post was killed or wounded by a surprise attack of the Germans at nightfall.

"He telephoned for reinforcements, and, dashing forward to a machine-gun which had its magazine full, and all its crew killed, carried it and its tripod out of the trench, till he was near enough to see where the fourth German attack, three companies of Bavarians, were about to cross the ditch between the two front trenches, and planting it in front of them, played it on them.

"They fled in disorder back to their trenches, cut to pieces, and leaving scores of dead on the ground. While he was doing this, he had his left leg shattered by a bomb, but Private Stedman (see below), one of the wounded British who had crawled out of the trench to protect him with their rifle-fire from stragglers of the German attack, held him up and enabled him to continue his fire until the British reinforcements came up and disposed of a fifth German attack, and re-manned the trench, and carried him into cover."

The first intimation Gray had of it was on the telephone before eight o'clock in the morning. His valet came to him and woke him to say, "Lord Douglas on the telephone, sir."

Gray slipped on a dressing-gown, and hopped in, minus his leg, to the telephone in his study, which adjoined the room where he slept.

"Hullo!" he said, taking up the receiver.

"Is that you, Oliver?" said the voice he loved best in the world now that Mirabel's was lost to him.

"Yes, what is it?"

"You've got it, Oliver! I laid a chap at the Marlborough an even hundred that you would!"

"Got what?"

"Haven't you seen it in the *Gazette*?"

"No—have they given me a Captaincy?"

"Have they given you a Captaincy? Yes, they have given you a Captaincy local to the Thames Embankment, but I shouldn't have rung you up about that! They have given you the greatest thing in the world that can happen to any soldier! You've been gazetted a V.C.!"

It was a heart-breaking response that came back. "I

can't think why ; but if they'd only done it in time, it might have saved me ! ”

“ Don't worry yourself !—a woman like that is not fit to be the mother of a V.C.'s children ! ”

“ Perhaps not, but it happens to be the only thing in life that I want ! ”

“ Cheer up ! When may I come round and shake your hand on it ? ”

“ You can be here in half-an-hour if you don't mind talking to me while I am eating my breakfast. I know your day-light-saving habits.”

“ That will suit me exactly, because I have to get out to my remounts.”

Punctually to the minute a card came up from the lift-man : *Earl of Douglas.*

The valet had instructions to show him up directly he came. A tall, serious man, in the uniform of a Dragoon Colonel, stepped out of the lift, not at all what the valet had expected for the gay Lord Avondale's father—Lord Avondale had been a frequent visitor at the flat.

Lord Douglas's congratulations to Gray were expressed in a handshake followed by silence. But he did not leave him until he had arranged that a fortnight later Gray should attend a dinner to be given in his honour at Lanarkshire House.

To this dinner The Douglas meant to invite, among others, the two Dukes, the Marquess, the Earls, and sundry Baronets and Lairds who still represent the junior line of the House of Douglas in the Aristocracy of Scotland, and retain most of the ancient possessions of the Douglases, except the lands which he himself held, as head of the senior line, of which he and Mirabel were the last representatives.

If Mirabel had not failed her husband so pitifully, nothing could have been more natural than for the Black Douglas to invite all the Red Douglas Peers to meet the husband of the heiress, on whom the survival of the senior line depended, when he had honoured the name by earning the V.C., the one distinction which could add any lustre to the annals of Scotland's most warlike House, which but for the murder of the sixth and eighth Earls of Douglas, and the loyalty of the fourth Earl of Angus, might have ousted the Stuarts

from the throne of Scotland, and might, with their virile qualities, have kept Scotland a separate kingdom to the end.

Because Mirabel had failed Oliver, Lord Douglas saw no reason why he should not give a Douglas dinner in honour of the new Scots V.C., whom he loved as a son. But he called it a Scots and not a Douglas dinner to Oliver Gray, for fear that remorse should prevent Gray from accepting the invitation. He knew that to any true Scot the word Scots would be irresistible.

When Lord Douglas drove home to tell Lady Douglas about the dinner, he found Paula there.

Lady Douglas had called up Paula on the telephone to know how Mirabel had been affected by the news. Neither Mirabel nor Paula had seen it. Womanlike, they did not read the war-news now that they had neither Oliver nor Archie there. Paula decided that before saying anything to Mirabel about it, she would taxi up to see Lady Douglas.

When Lord Douglas came in, and their first outburst of enthusiasm over Oliver at length calmed down, he told them about his idea of a Scottish dinner to Oliver for that day fortnight, and duly invited Paula.

"And what about Mirry?" said Lady Douglas.

"The woman who has divorced the guest of the evening cannot be asked," answered Lord Douglas coldly, but very decisively.

"By rights she ought not to be told of the V.C. either," said Paula, "but as we can't stop the mouths of all the newspapers, I suppose I had better go home and tell her. Will you have a taxi ordered for me?"

"My car is at the door," said Lord Douglas. "It will run you down."

On the way back to Hammersmith Paula thought over what she should say to Mirabel. She did not mean to spare her. She considered that she richly deserved the disappointment which she supposed that she would feel.

"Mirabel," she cried, bursting into the morning-room, "Oliver's got the V.C., and Lord and Lady Douglas are giving a great dinner in honour of it! And they've asked me!"

"Have you just come from them?" Mirabel asked, before saying one word about the V.C.

"Yes."

"What took you there?"

"Lady Douglas telephoned for me."

"How did they know about it?"

"It's in all the papers."

"Why did they telephone to *you*?"

"Because you've quarrelled with him, and they know that I love him!"

"Love him!" smiled Mirabel.

"Yes, I love him," said Paula, who had never anticipated the pleasure of making Mirabel jealous of *her*, as she obviously was at this minute.

"Who said I had quarrelled with him?" demanded Mirabel.

"The judge—when he pronounced the decree—and you yourself, when you brought an action to divorce him."

"I haven't quarrelled with Oliver. He's the most generous man I ever met," said Mirabel. "I'd sooner he had the V.C. than any man in England."

"Well, I'll tell him so," said Paula. "You can't have any communication with him, or you'll imperil your divorce."

"It's wicked!" cried Mirabel. "And you're a heartless woman to exult over my troubles in the way you're doing!"

"I'm not exulting, dear," said Paula. "I'm only sympathizing, and warning you."

"God save us from our friends!" said Mirabel, gathering up the papers and stalking out of the room.

All that day Oliver Gray received a stream of visitors, telephones and letters. But not a word came from the quarter where he hoped for it most, though he expected it least.

He knew, however, how she felt over it, because Paula told him on the telephone when she rang him up to congratulate him. She poured out her heart over the telephone. When she had finished at last, the crush of telephones from people who had been snubbed with "Number engaged—shall I call you?" can best be compared to the crowd breaking through, when the police withdraw their cordon at the Lord Mayor's Show.

Neither was Mirabel any less perturbed in her spirit than he was. It seemed so hard that the only person in all his acquaintance who could neither speak nor write nor tele-

phone congratulations to the hero, whose valour was being proclaimed from the house-tops, was the woman who had been his wife, and had tasted more of his generosity than any person under heaven.

However hardly she felt towards him as a husband, that paragraph in the *Gazette*, under the heading *Victoria Cross*, which described his feat, appealed with extraordinary force to one who had the best fighting blood of the Scots—a nation of warriors—in her veins. What was she to do? She was ready to do anything but be his wife.

For the rest of the morning, and all the afternoon, she alternately paced up and down her room, and sat in its window-bay, staring up the long sweep of the river. Paula, fathoming her mood, lunched at her club.

This was unfortunate in a way, because if Paula had been as sympathetic in her nature as Lord Douglas, she might have done a good deal with Mirabel during the latter's first outburst of feeling over the V.C.

As it was, she did not see Mirabel again till her heart had hardened once more—hardened especially against Paula, who had been invited to that odious Douglas dinner, which seemed to be given on purpose to exclude her in the most marked way possible. She knew that she would not be invited after what Lord Douglas had said to her on the subject of Oliver.

The first week and most of the second week had sped without a word passing directly between Mirabel and Oliver.

Nor did Mirabel say anything about the dinner to Paula. Indeed, she hardly spoke to Paula; she was so angry with her about it. To her mind, it was a conspiracy, and Paula was one of the most deeply involved of the conspirators. In revenge, she would not show Paula a single one of the newspaper-cuttings about Oliver and his V.C., which came in such showers from Old Mac on the square green paper slips of a well-known Presscutting Agency. They spoke more eloquently than anything, which Paula or Lord Douglas could have said, because Mirabel knew that they had no axe to grind, and they brought to light all sorts of lovable facts about him.

But even they spoke to a deaf heart, whose ears were stopped with prejudice and monomania.

Oliver Gray himself was heart-broken at not receiving any communication from her, though Paula had told him of her

feelings about the V.C., and the Douglasses felt angry and disappointed because she had not come to them in sackcloth and ashes to proclaim her intention of going to Oliver to say, " Husband, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy wife."

But madness will not parley with reason, so they had no consolation but in the fact that she had regained her health, and when the divorce had been made absolute, might marry again and have children to carry on the Douglas Earldom.

But two days before the dinner an assault upon her defences came from a new and unexpected quarter.

That morning an officer, in clothes very weather-beaten, from the front, had called upon Gray at the theatre.

" I am afraid that you cannot see him without writing to make an appointment," said the manager of the box-office.

" But, hang it all, I'm only going to be here for a few days, and half my leave will be gone before I can see him ! "

" I'm very sorry, sir, but my instructions upon the point are absolute."

" Are theatres under the War Office ? " asked the officer witheringly.

" No, sir," said the manager, quite interested, adding very politely, " May I ask what gave you the idea, sir ? "

" So like a War Office regulation to prevent anybody finding out anything about anything ! "

" May I give you a hint, sir ? "

" Any damned thing which will get me forrader ! "

" Well, sir, you'll find it much easier to see Captain John Gray, V.C., at the Thames Embankment Recruiting Office round the corner, first door to the left, than it is to see Mr. Oliver Gray, Junior, at the theatre."

The weather-beaten officer grinned, and took the hint. When he got into the Recruiting Office, he asked, " Can I see Captain Gray ? "

" I don't know what time he will be down, sir. He's so busy answering letters of congratulation about the V.C."

" Where is he ? "

" Up in his flat, sir."

" Can you get a message up to him ? "

" Certainly, sir. Shall I send up your card ? "

" No, send up word that an officer from his Battery in France has a message for him."

"Wellington, take this gentleman up to Captain Gray," said the Deputy Recruiting Officer to the Boy Scout who was waiting to run messages, and was devouring the details of the visitor's appearance.

"Is his name really Wellington?"

"No, we call them all Wellington because we get a different one each day, and it's easier than remembering their own names."

"Turn again, Wellington," said the officer to the boy, "and likewise, 'Lead on, MacDuff.'"

The boy took him up in the lift, and knocked at and entered Gray's study with more assurance than Guinevere Jones herself would have shown, or even Hughie Sprot.

No sooner had he ushered in his protégé, than Gray's face lighted up as it had not lighted up, even for his V.C.

"Worboys! by all that's holy!" he cried, springing up from his seat as if both legs were pure flesh and bone.

He got the answer that he might have expected. "There's nothing holey about me except my kit!" as Worboys flew to grasp his hand. "I saw the paragraph in the *Daily Mail* about your being *you* and I've brought you the congratulations of the boys," he said, "all that's left of the 200th Siege Battery. And at the hotel I've got a coal-scuttle made out of a misfire from one of your own guns. It isn't much good for holding coal," he explained, "but it shows the warmth of our feelings."

"Oh, Worboys," said Gray, "this is the happiest moment I've known for weeks!"

"Why, what's wrong with Mirry? I may call her Mirry, mayn't I?"

"I don't know—she's divorced me."

"Divorced you? I didn't know you were married."

"I was married before ever I entered the Army, before ever she made her appearance at my theatre."

"You were married when you let me make the running with her at Goodbody's?—married when she came over to the Island?"

"Yes."

"And you called her your fiancée?"

Beginning only to explain why he had called her his fiancée, a sudden impulse made Gray tell Worboys—the least likely person in his whole acquaintance to choose for a *confidant*—

the whole tragedy of his marriage, which he had never confided to anyone before.

"When she came down to Westernport of her own accord," he said, "I really thought that my troubles were beginning to mend, and that if ever I got safe home again, she would gradually make up her mind to live with me once more. While she was there at Christmas she was almost as sweet as she was when we were there on our honeymoon, and you can't think how delightful to me she was on our honeymoon ! Mirry, when she lets you love her, is an adorable woman !

"And she was just as sweet when she came to see me off at Southampton, and she wrote me truly affectionate letters right up to the time of his death." He had told Worboys of her love for Lord Avondale ; he had introduced the two boys when Archie stopped to speak to him on his way to storm the château.

"Well, I wired and wrote to her to tell her of his death, and from that day forward her letters grew steadily colder, and on the very first day that she saw me after my return she took the opportunity to tell me that she could never live with me again because—well, what she said is sacred, but I have told you what turned her."

He had told him almost everything, except Mirabel's wail because she had not been married to Archie, and therefore was not about to become the mother of his child. In that particular he had to be reticent. But he had mentioned that her chief grievance against him for compelling her to marry him was that it had made it impossible for her to marry Archie, when they were thrown together and fell in love with each other at first sight, and he had told him that she was so miserable about her marriage that the only way to save her from pining to death had been to allow her to divorce him, as he had done.

Worboys' face was a study as he listened. When Gray had come to the end of his story, shielding Mirabel lovingly in every line of it, Worboys said :

"It makes me sick ! I think ingratitude is the dirtiest thing in the world ! I don't believe any man who has been to a public school could behave as women do when they're put to the test. How could a man, for whom you had done as much as you have for her, round on you for no new fault of your own, because something over which you had no

control had happened since your original fault was condoned? I don't suppose that you could teach a woman the meaning of *noblesse oblige*! It's what you would have expected from the Chorus-girls at your place, not from her, I should have thought—though I don't know anything about them!"

To change the subject, Gray said, "By the bye, Worboys, I expect you would like to see something of behind-the-scenes while you are over here? How long have you got, and where are you staying?"

"I've got a week—that means five days clear, and I'm staying at the *Savoy*, because I thought I might just as well do myself well, when I might never have the chance of doing myself anyhow again."

"Go and fetch your things, and stay with me till you have to go back. It will save you a good bit of money, and you shall have the run of the theatre while you are here—behind as well as in front. I can't be there much myself, but I'll put you in charge of Old Mac—my manager, and tell him to give you as good a time as possible."

"Oh, but I can't sponge on you like that, Gray!"

"I don't see where the sponging comes in—I've got to have my meals whether you are here or not, and I don't pay for seats in my own theatre. Besides, I need cheering up badly, and you're the man to do it. And you can tell me all about the Battery."

"There's nothing very cheering about that. I'd rather talk about the Green Room while I'm at home."

"I'll promise you, you shall have as much Green Room as you like, if you'll come."

"Oh, I'll come all right! Just in time for dinner to-night. I've got something rather particular 'on my chest' for this afternoon."

"Right—dinner's at seven, if you want to see the piece. And I'll try who I can get into supper afterwards, to help you to enjoy yourself behind the scenes to-morrow night."

"Top-hole! It would have been the biggest day in my life, if only Mirry had been behaving!"

CHAPTER LXVIII

WORBOYS INTERVENES

THE next thing which Worboys did when he left Gray was to call Paula up on the telephone. Politeness demanded this, because, learning that his sister did not write to him, Paula had adopted him as the soldier to whom she would write regularly and send a weekly parcel.

He said that if it was convenient to her he would come and call on her in the afternoon, and he added that he had a message for Miss Douglas, which he would deliver at any time that she chose within three days.

Paula at once asked him to come to lunch, but he said that he would rather come in afterwards.

"Very well," she said. "I shall be in all the afternoon, and Mirabel will be back from her drive before five."

He turned up about two-thirty, looking so healthy and well and soldierly that Paula felt quite sentimental towards the end of the two hours which elapsed before Mirabel sent up word that she had come back, and would see Mr. Worboys in the morning-room before tea.

She imagined that he had something to say about Archie. So he had, in a way.

She was struck by the change in his appearance; he looked so completely the fighting man, and he looked so serious and masterful, that she felt quite drawn to him.

"How do you do, Mr. Worboys?" she said.

"How do you do, Miss Douglas?"

"You had a message for me?—or, at all events, something particular to say to me?"

"Something very particular."

She was prepared for staggering news, but she was not prepared for the direct onslaught of his words.

"I've come to tell you how hatefully I think you are behaving to Gray."

"Mr. Worboys!"

"Yes," he said, "somebody has to tell you, and I judge

that nobody has told you yet, how hatefully you are behaving to Gray ! ”

“ Did he ask you to come and tell me that ? ”

“ No, I took jolly good care that he should not know, or he would have stopped me ! He does not even know that I have your address.”

“ Well, what right have you to come, then ? ”

“ The right of a man who sees his best friend being ‘ done in ’ ! ”

The slang scored a point. Anyone except Worboys, who had come to do battle royal with her, would have been angrily formal—could have said nothing less formal than “ treated badly,” but he was himself, and said, “ done in.”

However it was quite resentfully that she said, “ How have I ‘ done him in ’ ? ”

“ Nobody knows so well as you do. You can’t deny it ! You can’t attempt to deny it ! ”

“ Can’t I ? ”

“ I’ll tell you part of it, if you like, but you’ll be able to double and treble it yourself ! ”

“ You do make me out an abominable character ! ”

“ So you are ! ”

“ Mr. Worboys ! ”

“ And I’ll prove it to you, if you like ! ”

“ I think you’d better ! ” she retorted sardonically. “ I might miss some points.”

“ Not if your conscience is in full working-order ! ”

“ Perhaps it isn’t,” she said in the same tones.

“ I don’t think it can be ! ”

“ Well, really . . . ! ”

“ It’s no good mincing words, Miss Douglas. Will you let me tell you what I think ? ”

Because he was in war-worn khaki, and was fighting for his friend as tenaciously as he had fought for his country, she let him. “ Go ahead ! ” she said, more gently.

“ Well, to start with, you owe a lot to Gray in your career.”

She gave a little nod.

“ I don’t say that he wasn’t playing for himself when he began, but he fell in love with you, as any other man would, and had to secure you somehow.”

“ You’ve a novel way of putting things, Mr. Worboys,” she said ironically, “ but it has the advantage of being graphic ! ”

"Perhaps I have," he said, without heeding the irony, "but I'm trying to keep as close to the point as possible. Well, shall we agree that he helped you in your career as no other man could have done, and that he did it for his own advantage?"

"Yes, I think we may agree to that."

"We may put in here that you loathed the marriage, but accepted it because you thought that your career would be made if you got the appointment to be his leading lady for a sufficient time?"

"Mr. Worboys, you are very insulting!"

"I don't think so. I started by admitting that you loathed the marriage. But, anyhow, you agreed to let me give you a plain statement of the case."

"Yes, I did, and I suppose that what you have said is, in the main, true."

"Thank you," he said. "It is better to admit or deny each point as we go along. Now, I am prepared to admit that there was some justification for your making the condition that you should be at liberty to leave him at the end of a month, unless he behaved in such a way as to make you change your mind."

"That did not come into the agreement at all. I was to have complete liberty."

"I know it did not come into the agreement. It would have been even more injurious to his feelings than yours to put it in. But I'll bet that your lawyers as well as his understood this to be implied!"

"It does not matter if they did; it was my contract, not theirs."

"Quite so. But that was the implication, and even if it had not been the implication, I ask you, as a fair-minded woman, if it was not natural for him to believe that you put in this condition, because he had been one of the b-hoys, and you didn't know what sort of a husband he would make?"

"Honour bright, Mr. Worboys, I did not put in this condition with any such idea. I put it in so that my leaving him might not be irrevocable, though I saw no chance of my changing my mind."

"That may be; but you will admit that it was natural for him to believe otherwise?"

"Yes, I see now that he might have put that construction on it."

"You'll bet he did think so. And what happened? Was he a white man during that month?"

"Yes, he was very much what you call 'a white man.'"

"Then didn't you think it rather unfair to turn him off when the month was over, Miss Douglas?"

"I did not look upon it in that light at all. Humanly speaking, my decision was irrevocable; it did not depend on his behaviour."

"Well, pass by that; is it not a fact that between that time and the time when I saw you at Westernport, he was so good to you that you were growing quite fond of him?"

"I don't think you have any right to ask that question."

"If you won't answer it, I shall have to tell you what I think, which is that unless you thought that he was trying to do his best, or were so fond of him that you were willing to forgive his not trying, you had no right to treat him as you did treat him, when you were down at Westernport."

"What do you mean, Mr. Worboys?"

"I mean that you made us all think that you were in love with him. And ditto, ditto at Southampton."

"Well, and what of that?"

"You grant it, then?"

"I don't say that I do."

"What I say is, that if you let a man think that you love him before he goes to the war, and he lives for you while he is there, whenever he is not on duty against the enemy, I say that if he does a big thing for his country, and comes back crippled for life, he has a right to expect you to love him as much as you did before he went away, unless he has done anything to forfeit your love in the interval."

"My love is my own."

"Not when it is as good as pledged to him, and he has done nothing to lose it."

"But a fresh circumstance had happened which arose entirely from his having forced me to marry him."

"You had condoned that already, so no fresh circumstance could arise out of it."

"Unfortunately, it did."

"If you take that attitude, I must remind you that nobody forced you to marry him, or could have forced you to marry

him. You married him because, all things considered, you thought it was good enough, and then, because, owing to an outside chance, it wasn't good enough, you wreaked your revenge on Gray, who had been as good a husband as any man could be, from the very day that he married you ! ”

“ You must own that he persuaded me against my better judgment, and that my judgment was better than his.”

“ I don't agree to that at all ; apart from the title which will be yours anyhow, I can't see that you did show better judgment, but I respect your feelings too much to discuss that. What I must say is, that I think that, ever since he's been your husband, Gray has been a ripper ! ”

“ I'll admit that—I think he has been a darling. I only wish I could forgive him ! ”

“ You've nothing to forgive, except yourself, and that may be pretty hard ! What you've got to do is to ask his forgiveness for persecuting him, if you want any self-respecting soldier to know you ! I'm not going to know you any more till you do ! Good-bye ! ”

“ Won't you have a cup of tea before you go ? ”

“ No, thanks ! I'll just run upstairs to say good-bye to Miss Maitland, and make an appointment with her.”

He shook hands with her so coldly that she would rather that he had left without shaking hands.

* * * * *

The cause of all Mirabel's perturbation did not, of course, when he turned up to dinner, disclose to Gray where he had been, and Gray was glad to get away from his thoughts by showing Worboys a little “ life ” as the insouciant young soldier understood it.

They dined at the *Babylon Restaurant*, where Gray indicated the notoriety of both sexes, and after dinner Worboys had “ the night of his life,” for he and Gray saw the piece from the stage-box ; went behind the scenes between the acts, for Worboys to be introduced to the various Beauties of the *Babylon*, and wound up by a supper in Gray's flat, sent up from the *Restaurant*, at which Guinevere Jones, the leading lady, Topsy Perks, Carrie Christmas and Betty Farnol were present, with Hughie Sprot.

It was the first supper which Gray had given in his flat

since he had known Mirabel, and the ladies, not remembering that the venue was largely dictated by the licensing laws of war, were duly elated, and stayed till a not very early hour in the morning. They noticed that Gray was handing all the fun on to Worboys, but they knew the reason, and were sympathetic.

Worboys, giving Paula lunch at the *Savoy* on the next day, was very full of the night he had spent, and what he was going to do with his other nights, and he was so naïve about it that Paula could not help entering into the fun of the thing, and drawing him out. He would make a good character for one of her books.

At tea-time she shaped the character out by telling the story of his doings, with Paulesque embellishments, to Mirabel. She did not do it maliciously, but merely to amuse herself.

The effect was the same. It was the crowning blow, that Oliver should have grown weary of good works, and should have gone dissipating with Worboys, taking him into dressing-rooms, introducing him to all the fastest women in the theatre, and winding up by having his new leading lady and Betty, and those two minxes, Carrie and Topsy, to supper in his flat ! It did not occur to her that Oliver was merely doing it with the intention of showing Worboys the height of hospitality, or that Oliver was like a teetotaller who does not drink himself, because it does not suit him, but has no mission to make others follow his example. She might have thought of Oliver's favourite motto about the cakes and ale, and remembered that he had turned his back on the life of the *Babylon* solely because he was so much in love with her, that he had eyes for no other woman. There was no reason why he should harden his heart to them now that he was divorced. In fact, it was rather for the good of the theatre that he should not.

Mirabel should have reasoned that but for Worboys's presence, he would have lacked the inclination.

She was too jealous to do that. She pictured her friends Guinevere, Betty, Carrie and Topsy, plying him with all their graces, as they did, for they were very fond of him ; they had been in his employ for a long time, and he had been uniformly considerate and cordial to them, and he was down on his luck about a woman. Tara, with the best

intentions, was incapable of keeping a cat in its bag. That he did not enjoy more favour was merely due to his backwardness.

Paula had completely destroyed Mirabel's peace of mind by repeating Worboys's gossip. Guinevere Jones was probably already dreaming dreams, because she took herself seriously.

Why had that inconvenient Worboys come over from France, and dragged Oliver into these associations again, *for which he was far too good?* Mirabel was sincerely disgusted.

* * * * *

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Mirabel started to think furiously. Here was Worboys, a mere boy, whom she had always treated as a joke, announcing his intention of cutting her if she did not make it up with Oliver! It was just like Worboys's cheek. But it worried her more than a little.

It is a serious thing to be cut by a man who does not think ; a man who does not think does not act unless facts stare him in the face. Had it come to this : that her behaviour to the man who was no longer her husband, was staring Worboys in the face ?

When she parted from him at Southampton Worboys had been a typical boy ; now he was a typical fighting man, with his dogged jaw and his readiness to die for honour. It was not a light thing, to lose the respect of such a man. Had she treated Gray very badly ? The idea was altogether new to her. She had been wrapping herself in a martyr's cloak, which covers as many sins as charity. She had been the injured one, the white snow, which had been trampled and soiled.

Worboys did not share this view ; he appeared to think her a heartless jilt, a person who had accepted a bribe, and did not wish to perform the service for which she had been paid ; in his eyes she was almost a swindler.

Why could not other men be like Gray, who thought no evil ; who never complained ; who never reproached ?

When the day itself came, Mirabel wished she had died when she was ill. It was unspeakable that Paula should be present, and that she should not be present at a dinner of

the Douglas Peers and lairds given by The Douglas in honour of the man who had been her husband, not only because he was a Scottish V.C., but because he was one of his dearest friends, a man whom he delighted to honour !

It was such a very emphatic way of stating how they sided in the divorce, which possessed significance for all the guests, if the divorce had come to their ears, inasmuch as it concerned the marriage of the future Countess of Douglas.

She had a long talk on the telephone in her dressing-room, and when her Italian maid brought her her tea, she said : " Tell cook I am dining out. I am going to the theatre."

The maid was rather surprised by the frock which she chose.

" Oh, Signorina ! the silver is the most beautiful dress you have ! Isn't it too good for the theatre ? "

" I like to look my best at the theatre," said Mirabel. " I'm an actress."

The idea pleased Caterina, who felt sure that people would be as much interested in Mirabel sitting in the stalls, as in the heroine on the stage. It also showed that her interest in life was returning, a welcome sign.

CHAPTER THE LAST

JAMAIS ARRIÈRE

GRAY looked forward to the great evening with mixed feelings. It would be the proudest evening of his life—that was certain—for he was invited to meet some of the heads of the Scottish nobility, not only as a V.C. of Scottish birth, but because Lord and Lady Douglas always treated him as if he were still the husband of the heiress of the Douglases. But it was that "as if" which robbed the evening of half its glory, for it reminded him of the woman who had taken him to that house, who had taken him in appearances as her lover, and a candidate for her hand, when he was her husband, separated by contract. All through the evening her ghost would rise and rebuke him whenever he forgot and was happy. He would hardly have had the courage to go if he had not asked if he might bring

an officer of his Battery, home from the front on leave, who was staying with him.

Dinner was at eight-fifteen, but Gray was asked to be there by eight, and the hour was chiming from an old French clock as he and Worboys, who was dreadfully concerned about the war-stains of his uniform, till Gray said that they would be the toast of the evening more than he was, entered the drawing-room.

Two of the guests were already in the room, but that did not prevent Lady Douglas from saying, "You must let an old woman kiss you, Oliver, on this greatest night of our lives!" before she presented him and Worboys to a Duke and Duchess who were Douglases, though they had another name tacked on to the Douglas. They were elderly people, and very interested and gracious.

Lord Douglas, who had a royal memory, came up at that moment, and said to Gray, "Why didn't you tell me that it was Mr. Worboys whom you were bringing? Did you forget that we had met at Southampton?"

Worboys's weatherburn took on a deeper crimson with pleasure and pride.

The other guests, too, were unusually punctual, for everyone was anxious to make the V.C.'s acquaintance before the dinner was served.

The only persons in the room without a title, except Gray, were Worboys and Paula. Paula was a very charming and striking figure as she blushed and smiled her congratulations to Gray. People noticed that he detained her for a few minutes' earnest conversation, and were much interested to know who she was; they might have been more interested had they known that every question referred to the wife who had divorced him.

At dinner Paula found herself sitting between Worboys and the Duke, who had taken in Lady Douglas, and was asked by her, as a fillip to conversation, if he had read Miss Maitland's novel, "The Lady of Lochleven." He had not, but he asked Paula many questions about it, and gallantly offered the use of certain of the "Lochleven" Douglas archives, which were in his possession, if ever she wrote another book on the subject. The George Douglas who enabled Queen Mary to escape from Lochleven had naturally been one of the chief characters in her story.

He also talked a great deal to Gray, who sat on Lady Douglas's right, and had been assigned to his Duchess, which gave the socialistic Paula a chance to devote herself to her war-godson, on her other hand.

Whoever he was whom The Douglas delighted to honour, Gray himself won all hearts, as he sat there in his khaki, with the Cross of Valour on his left breast, and a face still tanned with all weathers by the war, the type of the modest and serene soldier, who has had greatness thrust upon him, because he has endured to the end against hopeless odds.

And when Lord Douglas proposed his health, not only as a Scottish V.C., but "as one whom we have come to look upon as a son," every eye kindled.

As soon as the ladies left them, the men all drew in their seats round him, to hear the moving tale of the deed which they had met to celebrate, which he was so loath to tell, that the presence of Worboys proved very necessary. And Worboys, under his breath, told those who were near enough a yet more moving tale—how this man had closed the eyes of the dead heir of the House in that Observation Post on the battle-field. He was listened to with chivalrous attention; he was so obviously the fighting man straight from the front.

Some mournful remembrance, they thought, must have been recalled when suddenly Gray broke down in an episode which he was relating. But it was only that his quick ear had caught the sound of a woman singing. So had Lord Douglas's, for he said, "The ladies are having some music: that must be a signal for us to join them."

As they moved up the grand staircase to the drawing-rooms, a glorious voice seemed to fill the whole house with the refrain :

"Ye tak' the high road, an' I'll tak' the low road,
An' I'll be in Scotland afore ye . . ."

Those who were near Gray saw him turn very white, and attributed it to pain from his wound. They hurried to his side, but he said, "It's nothing—it will pass." And to one, whom he knew better, he confessed, "It's merely that this song awakens sad memories for me," which his auditor supposed to be of the battle-field. Only Worboys

and Lord Douglas knew that the tragedy was not of the battle-field, and they were dumbfounded.

The men waited outside the door till the song was finished, and then all made way for Gray, the hero of the evening, who had modestly dropped back to the last place as they mounted the stair. When the footmen threw open the door, and he advanced into the great drawing-room, his eye swept over it as keenly as if he were still in an Observation Post.

Yes, standing by the piano, from which she had just risen, and listening to a chorus of congratulation on her wonderful singing, looking exquisite in a dress of silver lace, with a scarlet rose at her breast, was Mirabel. Her not appearing in mourning, so soon after Archie's death, in his father's house, had a message of deep import to convey, as had that rose.

It was obvious who had been singing, and the men all followed Lord Douglas as he went across to her. But he did not go to thank and congratulate her. What he did say, almost sternly, was, "Good evening, Mirabel—does this mean . . . ?"

"Yes, Jim," she said, in tones that brooked no doubt.

He was doubly glad—glad for Oliver's sake, and glad because it made it possible for him to welcome his lovely cousin, who was unusually beautiful that night. The emotion under which she was labouring, the tears which she had wept in the afternoon, made those wonderful Sicilian eyes burn like black fire, and her expression and attitude were so wistful.

"What a gorgeous voice! What a ripping woman! Who is she?" said one of the Douglas Peers, who did not know her, *sotto voce* to the old Duke, who answered, "She's Isabel Douglas, Jim's heir, when she's here, and Mirabel Douglas at the Babylon Theatre."

And catching her eye at that moment, he gallantly bent over the hand which she held out for him to shake—being of the old school—as he said, "How are you, my dear Scots' cousin?"

"Rather a poor creature, I'm afraid, to-night, Duke. You will excuse me for a little, won't you, while I go and offer my congratulations to the guest of the evening?"

All eyes were on her as she advanced, with more emotion

than she had ever thrown into her part on the stage, true actress though she had proved herself, to where Oliver was standing, devouring her with his eyes.

She held out both hands when she got up to him, though she half hung back to say, "Do you want to hear your wife's congratulations, Jack?"

He grasped her hands firmly in his own, and, looking deep into her eyes, said in low tones, "More than anything in the world, Mirry!"

As he said it, her drooped eyes fell on the watch with the shattered face. Then she raised her eyes again to meet his, with that gracious and affectionate smile which the audience at his theatre loved, and then she flushed, because she saw that Worboys was there, and watching her.

She bowed to him, and he came over to shake hands with unconcealed pleasure. He was proud of being recognized as an old friend, and doubly proud to see that his scoldings had gone home.

When they were out of earshot, a little knot of men began to question the Duke, since he had called himself her Scots' cousin.

"Is he really the husband of that lovely woman?"

"Not that I have ever heard of. But some actresses think it spoils their chances in their profession to let it be known that they are married—at least, they used to in my day. You'd better ask Jim Douglas," he said. "She must have told him: she's like a daughter here."

One of them went over to ask The Douglas.

"Yes, it's quite true," he said. "There you behold the ancestor of my successors." And seeing that the situation seemed to require some explanation, he said, "They've had a big quarrel, and the V.C. has made it up." He was speaking of the Cross itself, but it was true of the wearer.

The men, when their spokesman went back to them, wondered why they had not been told in the invitation that Gray was the husband of the Douglas heiress, and that this was the true occasion of the Douglas dinner. There were present nine Douglas Peers, Black and Red, besides various Douglas Baronets and Lairds, with pedigrees and possessions derived from the Middle Ages, all sprung, like the Peers, from the Knight of the Black Water, the fortunate brother of Freskin and contemporary of Richard Cœur-de-

Lion. But Lady Douglas had such a name for eccentricities that no one suspected this part of the programme of being impromptu. It was Lady Douglas's way of doing it, that was all, and it had afforded the company a fine sensational evening.

Mirabel could hardly avoid starting when some one came up and addressed her as "Mrs. Gray." She had never been called Mrs. Gray since her honeymoon, down at Westernport, though she had been married more than two years.

She had a difficult rôle to play, for she knew many more of the people than Oliver did, and these all wished, though they might not say so, for an explanation of why she had never mentioned her marriage.

Lady Douglas saved the situation with one of her inadvertencies. Her ruling passion was her *salon*, and Mirabel and Gray had been two of its chief lions. She began to tell people this, and drifted into enlarging on the romance of the proprietor of the *Babylon* having fallen in love with and married his leading-lady, and without any intent to deceive gave the impression that it was the result of the success of the play. This was the most convenient way of getting over the fact of the marriage having been kept a secret so long: it was comparatively easy to explain their coming separately, and having that dramatic scene in the drawing-room.

Since, after having been the talk of the town in "Mary, Queen of Scots," Mirabel was not playing in "The Uniform Girl," people jumped at the erroneous idea that she had indignantly refused to be seen in such a piece, while the fact was that the management had reverted to their old type of play because Mirabel's services were not available.

A youthful Marchioness, a keen patroness of the stage, thought it most romantic that "The Uniform Girl" quarrel should have been healed by Gray's getting his V.C.

It was obvious to everybody how fond of each other they were, because, instead of allowing themselves to be lionized separately, which would have been more convenient, the beautiful young wife insisted on dancing attendance on her disabled husband, whose leg-stump was completely healed, and who needed attention less than she did, in her state of health. But it was Mirabel's form of penitence, and as there is nothing more exquisite than the radiance of a

beautiful Italian woman in love—Mirabel was a Visconti and not a Douglas to the eye—she was enchanting her audience as completely with her own feelings as if she was playing a part. It was her first appearance in tragedy.

It was some time after eleven before every guest had left, except Gray and Worboys, and Mirabel and Paula, who were standing, Mirabel with her left arm through her husband's, in front of one of the blazing log fires on an open hearth, which The Douglas loved because they reminded him of the banqueting hall at his beloved Scots Castle, which he visited so seldom.

They were beginning to say good-bye to their hosts. Lord Douglas was looking hard at his cousin. It was long since he had thought her pretty; beautiful, yes, but she had of late lacked the adorable youthfulness and playfulness which are the prime constituents of prettiness.

Now she looked her age, which was twenty-four—or less? There was not a trace of the leading lady about her: she was more the girl-bride on her honeymoon, smiling to everyone her frank pleasure in possessing a man of her own, in being that woman of the world, a married lady. It was, indeed, a honeymoon, for it was the first time that any of her friends had ever seen her as a wife, however often they might have seen her tantalizing her husband.

"By the bye, Mirry," said Lord Douglas, to tease her, "how did you come to be here? I know that you weren't asked."

"I appeal to Janet!"

"I asked her," confessed Lady Douglas. "It was such a mockery to ask these people to meet Oliver, without asking Mirry, when I knew that all the Peerage of Scotland, with the Peerages of England and Ireland thrown in, were not worth her little finger to him!"

"I asked to be asked," said Mirabel.

"Which of you two is telling the truth?" laughed Lord Douglas.

"Both of us," said Mirabel. "I asked to be asked first, and then she asked me. Shall I tell you all about it?"

"Yes," said everybody.

"Well, I thought about it and cried with rage all day, and about tea-time I couldn't endure it any longer—the thought that all these people would be hanging round my husband,

and I not there, when I wanted him and he wanted me more than all the rest of the world. So I 'phoned to Janet, and asked her if I might come in after dinner. I felt that I could not face the ordeal of dinner—my eyes would not be ready. 'Where are you dining?' she asked. 'At my club, the Sesame.'

"Well, start a little early, and come in to see me on the way. I have something to say to you which I shouldn't like to say over the 'phone. 'Phones have ears.'

"When I got here, she said, 'You're only coming here to-night on one condition, Mirry. Do you understand what that is?'

"Yes, I understand,' I said, 'but supposing he doesn't want it after my behaving so badly to him? Can you ever get him to forgive me, Janet?'

"I can answer for that,' she said."

"Wasn't I right, Oliver?" chimed in Lady Douglas.

For answer he pressed his lips on Mirabel's head, as it leant against his shoulder.

"And so I am here," said Mirabel, "with my husband."

"He's not your husband, I am afraid, till you have broken the *decree* by living with him again," said Lord Douglas gravely.

"I don't care; I'm going to treat him as if he was," she said, in mock defiance.

"This is fortunately a case where the observance of the law lies in its breach," he pronounced.

While Mirabel and Paula were putting on their wraps, Gray stayed for a word with his hosts.

"You read my heart," he said to Lady Douglas. "What a glorious night you have made it!"

And Lord Douglas said to her, "It is not every conspiracy which can be forgiven so easily as this, Janet."

"Then you welcome me as Mirry's husband?"

"There is no one I would welcome so much," replied Lord Douglas, "if, in your fidelity to her, you remember the motto of our house, *Jamais Arrière*."

When Mirabel and Paula returned, their hosts went down with them to see them into their cars, which Grainger considered scandalously undignified.

Paula said her good-bye and got in first. She knew that Mirabel's good-bye might be a long one.

When the penitent and forgiven Mirabel at length kissed her cousins, and was about to step into her car, Gray said, "Mayn't I drive you home, Mirry?"

"Of course, dear!" she replied, and turning to her chauffeur, without the slightest warning, said, "My husband is going to drive me home, Nares."

Nares's training was equal to the occasion. All he said was, "Yes, Ma'am," instead of, "Yes, Miss."

Paula drove off.

While Worboys was waiting for a taxi to take him back to Gray's flat, Mirabel poured out her heartfelt thanks to him. For it was Worboys who had opened her eyes.

"You shall have the finest photograph I have to hang up in your billet, signed Mirabel Douglas on one side, and Mirabel Gray on the other—the first time I shall ever have written Mirabel Gray on a photo—to remind you of your handiwork!"

"It won't hang in the billet," he said. "If I get a bullet through my heart when I go back, it will go through something else first! But I'm rewarded without that, Mirry—may I say Mirry?"

"Always Mirry to you, Peter Worboys!"

Then there was another long leave-taking. For the V.C. guest of the evening had grown into something more since the evening began. And when at length they had taken their seats, and the very last good-nights had been spoken, Lord Douglas had a word with the chauffeur, in which he advised him to drive from Kensington Gore to Hammersmith by way of the Marble Arch.

In the car they arranged that Gray should come to Bolingbroke House openly as its master on the following afternoon, accompanied by Worboys till the end of his leave. Since the law required a witness of their happiness before the divorce could be quashed, there was certainly no one who had such a good right to witness it as Paula—the ideal person for the purpose, if she would promise not to put them into a novel. And Worboys was a good second.

Later on they might live at the flat, if Gray really found Bolingbroke House as inconvenient for his business as Mirabel had represented to Dr. Cantelupe.

All too soon the car drew up at Bolingbroke House. Mirry

had not begun to say good-bye, so the car had to wait outside the house—how long only the chauffeur knew.

Gray went up the steps with her to see her in. When she had put the latch-key into the door, and opened it, she suddenly kissed him once more. Why should she care what the chauffeur thought, when he would know all about it before the experienced earth was twenty-four hours older?

She did not even care what Paula would say about her being so long. It would suit her present mood to be a martyr for her husband.

But Paula was all smiles. She was too happy over their reconciliation to utter a word of reproach. She was even prepared to be gracious if Mirry, after her sudden confidence to her chauffeur, had changed her mind when she was in the car with Oliver, and invited him to take possession of the house there and then, instead of waiting till the next afternoon.

Paula had spent a whole half-hour in telling Mirabel's maid what Mirabel had told her chauffeur in a second or two. And she did not forget to point out that Oliver must receive the welcome suited to a V.C. and a wounded man.

The admonition was not needed; Caterina was in love with Oliver herself, for his patient and chivalrous devotion to her mistress.

"I am glad, Signora," she said, when she began to help her to undress.

"Glad at what?" the happy Mirabel had the audacity to ask.

"Miss Maitland's told me, Signora."

Then Mirabel confessed. "I'm gladder than I ever was in my life, Caterina! Isn't it splendid that he's too badly wounded ever to go back again?"

"Was he wounded again to-night, Signora?"

"I hope not—he could not have been, unless I did it," said her mistress. "Didn't you know that he had lost his leg?"

It seemed that the artificial limb had completely taken in Caterina, from the flood of adjectives like "*Poverino! Bellino!*"

They did not prevent her from being expeditious; being Italian, she knew how Mirabel must want to be left alone with her happiness.

Mirabel, now that the scales of remorse and resentment had fallen from her eyes, had recovered the sunniness of her Lyceum days. When she sank to sleep, her face was as clear as a child's.

Before she switched the light off, she took a long look at the landscape of Lake Como frescoed on the walls of her room, and when she fell asleep she dreamed of her villa on the Lake. She was sitting once more at the foot of the stair by the harbour-wall, waiting for the perfect love. A boat glided silently into the harbour, and from it stepped out the tall fair man of her dreams. Yes, it was true: he had Oliver's face, and, lest doubt should mar the magic of the vision, even while her eyes were devouring him, his clothes suffered a dream-change into the khaki of a British officer, with a little bronze cross above his heart.

Press cutting from

“The Times,”

Date of Issue: TUESDAY, DEC. 26TH, 1916.

GRAY.—On Christmas Day, at Bolingbroke House, The Mall, Chiswick, the wife of Captain John Gray, V.C., of the Babylon Theatre, of a son.

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—

New 6s. Novels.

The Wisdom of Damaris

By LUCAS MALET

Author of "Sir Richard Calmady," etc.

The above long novel, which is the fruit of many years of thought and work, will most probably prove to be the author's best and most important work of fiction.

The scene of the first portion of the novel is laid in Northern India, where Damaris Verity's father, a famous soldier of the Mutiny, occupies a distinguished command.

The scene afterwards changes to the neighbourhood of Marychurch, an ancient seaport town on the English south coast, where General Verity owns a small property. Here Damaris passes her girlhood, and learns much about men and things, not, perhaps, usually known by young ladies of her age. The novel should be interesting as indicating the social conditions which have gone far to produce in this country the Feminist movement of the present day.

The Eyes of the Blind

By M. P. WILLCOCKS

Author of "Change," "The Wings of Desire,"
"The Power Behind," etc.

The question asked of the prisoner in the Bastille in Dickens' "Tale of Two Cities" was: "Are you glad to be recalled to life?" Miss Willcocks' new novel has a similar subject, for it is the story of one who regained his eyesight after an operation with most disconcerting results. We are often told that it is folly to be wise if ignorance is bliss. In this novel we are asked whether, if blindness means happiness, one should therefore shrink from the light. It is a story more intense in its drama than her recent books, since, like "Wings of Desire," it deals mainly with West Country types, and, like "The Wingless Victory," it is a novel of temptation and of the love that conquered after a hard fight. Miss Willcocks has gone back to the old simple things that are as old as man and woman, though here, too, there is the interest of opposing social and religious atmospheres, and here again many of the "saints!" are but whitened sepulchres.

New 6s. Novels.

The World-Mender

By MAXWELL GRAY

Author of "The Silence of Dean Maitland, etc.

"The World-Mender" is somewhat akin to the author's previous book, "The Great Refusal," and bids fair to be as successful. It is a long novel, and tells the history of a village boy's rise to be Cabinet Minister, his training, psychological development, and the gradual sloughing of his extreme Socialist and Radical principles as he rises. There is a strong love interest, and the charming scenes and characters of country life, which are a characteristic feature of this author's work, are not the least attractive features of this important novel.

Disentangled

By CURTIS YORKE

Author of "Her Measure," "The Girl in Grey," etc.

This is the story of a man who loved one woman, and, by a curious mistake, married another. How all seemed to go wrong for a time—how a young woman made mischief, and an old woman made peace—how many interesting things happened, and some sad things, and some amusing things—all are told in Curtis Yorke's well-known and peculiarly distinctive style. "Disentangled" contains, perhaps, some of the best work this popular author has yet given us, and will undoubtedly add to her already enormous circle of readers.

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The Bars of Iron

By ETHEL M. DELL

Author of "The Way of an Eagle," etc.

This story will be very widely welcomed by the great novel-reading public, and especially by Miss Dell's large circle of admirers. In this new book she maintains that vivacious power which has so long held her readers spell-bound, and at the same time she has given us what is undoubtedly *the best novel that she has written*.

Piers Evesham, the heir to Sir Beverley Evesham, of Roding Park, falls in love with Avery Denys, the Mother's-help at the Vicarage. He afterwards discovers that Avery is the widow of Eric Denys, the man whom he had killed, when he was but nineteen years of age, in a fatal brawl which occurred in Australia. Piers, the passionate lover, struggles with this secret knowledge, which nearly rends his very soul, and he refrains from fulfilling his promise to confess his crime. The battle with his imaginary fate is most ably conceived, and the scenes are depicted with vivid realism.

Avery Denys, the lovable Mother's-help, is presented to the reader with a power that will attract all. Aunt Avery, as she is called by the Vicar's children, protects them from the cruel treatment of their narrow-minded, severely strict father. Avery, who avoids Piers, and at first will not listen to his avowals of adoration, at last consents to become his wife. After their union she accidentally hears that it was Piers who caused the death of her first husband. This information instantly fills her with bitterness, and she insists that she and Piers shall part. The estrangement and final reconciliation are powerfully described, but the latter is not achieved until Piers has been to the Front and returned totally disabled.

New 6s. Novels

Proud Peter

By W. E. NORRIS

Author of "No New Thing," &c.

"Proud Peter" is the life story, related by himself, of a man who is led, partly by force of circumstances, but more by the trend of his character, into repeated acts of self-sacrifice. The second son of a west country gentleman, he is at first intended for holy orders, but has to disappoint his parents both in that respect and afterwards, more seriously, in others. The vicissitudes of a career which he allows a cloud to darken take him to Queensland, as a breeder of horses, to the precincts of the Divorce Court and to South Africa during the Boer War. It is some time since Mr. W. E. Norris attained a position in the first rank as a writer of charming fiction, but readers of the present book will admit that he continues to hold them by the magic of his pen.

The Hut by the River

By G. B. BURGIN

Author of "The Shutters of Silence," etc.

"The Hut by the River" hides a thrilling mystery, worked out with all Mr. Burgin's wonted skill, and deals with the unpremeditated but fatal revolver shot at her husband and his inamorata by the "leading lady" of a light opera company which reaches Plantagenet, a little township in Ontario. In her flight the "leading lady" is compelled to leave her child behind her, and that child becomes the innocent accomplice in the death of a licentious Seigneur, who persecutes her with his unwelcome attentions. "Old Man" Tucker and Peter van Loo alone are sufficient to hold the reader's attention ; and the suffering mother, with her noble self-sacrifice when she braves death to see her daughter again, is a convincing study of maternal love and devotion. The tragedy of the story is lightened by many touches of quiet humour and picturesque description.

New 6s. Novels

Twilight

By FRANK DANBY

Author of "The Heart of a Child," etc.

"Twilight" is in a vein that is entirely new for Frank Danby, but it proves the author's versatility, for it is a convincing story of absorbing interest. The principal character in the tale is an invalid woman who takes a country house which she soon discovers to be haunted. She finds that she possesses, probably owing to her ill health, a faculty which enables her to visualize a woman, Margaret by name, who was once a tenant of the house. This ghostly visitant was during her lifetime a writer with a passing vogue, and her object in haunting the place is actuated by the desire of having her life written. She induces the invalid to undertake this task, and some diaries, letters and notes reveal the story of the dead woman.

The book is full of minor incidents, and those clever character studies which contribute so much to the vitality and realism of Frank Danby's stories.

The Douglas Romance

By DOUGLAS SLADEN

Author of "His German Wife," "The Tragedy of the Pyramids," etc.

In this new novel Mr. Douglas Sladen deals with the vicissitudes of a beautiful girl of good family, who is left an orphan, and just before the war goes into musical-comedy, to make her living.

Much of the interest of the book lies in the transformation of the men who seek her hand, from rich and dissolute idlers, hanging round the green room, to gallant soldiers at the front.

The book contains some of the glowing and palpitating battle-scenes which have won Mr. Sladen so many readers in his earlier novels.

Like "His German Wife," Mr. Sladen's new novel, which this time has no foreign characters in it, is a dainty and vivacious love-story, full of human nature and humour, thrown into relief by occasional bursts of tragedy.

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Author of "The Lady Noggs," etc.

The story of a wealthy and amiable man about town who, in his disappointment at being rejected for the army, leads deliberately the life of the complete rotter that the rejection declares him to be. He turns night into day and in the society of a club of like-minded associates, plays the waster from sunset to the dewy dawn. Chance brings him into contact with a charming country girl lost in London. How this meeting leads to his complete reformation and how he soon finds himself wholly out of touch with the night-hawk life, must be left for the reader discover.

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